

## Is “Doing Educational Research” a Matter of Perspective? Two Reviewers Begin the Dialogue

**Doing Educational Research: A Handbook.** Kenneth Tobin and Joe Kincheloe (Eds.). Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2006. 480 pp., \$147.00 (hardcover), ISBN 90-77874-01-1; \$49.00 (paper), ISBN 90-77874-48-8.

### A Thick Description of Thick Description

A Review by  
Peter Smagorinsky

There is much to recommend *Doing Educational Research: A Handbook*, edited by Kenneth Tobin and Joe Kincheloe. It provides exceptionally thoughtful explorations and accounts of a host of research approaches that by and large represent a qualitative approach to conducting education research. The methodologies outlined suggest that the field is broad, diverse, and complex and that conducting research in this tradition requires a lot of thoughtful work. The book is pitched at what I would call an introductory level: The language is usually accessible, and each author outlines an approach with theoretical rigor and clear illustrations from his or her own research.

The authors enlisted are top-tier experts in the methods they describe. Readers have the opportunity to walk through critical reflections on a broad array of research approaches by people who know their business well: Kathleen Berry on bricolage; Shirley R. Steinberg on critical cultural studies research; Barbara Thayer-Bacon and Diana Moyer on philosophical and historical research; Greg Martin, lisahunter, and Peter McLaren on participatory action research; Aaron David Gresson III on critical research; Christine A. Lemesianou and

Jaime Grinberg on criticality in education research; Wolff-Michael Roth on conversation analysis; David W. Jardine on hermeneutics; Rebecca J. Lloyd and Stephen J. Smith on phenomenology; Leila A. Villaverde, Joe L. Kincheloe, and Frances Helyar on historiography; William F. Pinar on literary study; and Alice J. Pitt and Deborah P. Britzman on psychoanalytic perspectives. Additional chapters by Kenneth Tobin, Pam Joyce, and Joelle Tutela; Phil Frances Carspecken; and John Willinsky frame and reflect on these methodological explorations, often with insight and wisdom.

The introductory nature of the presentation makes this volume most appropriate for doctoral classes on some aspect of qualitative research, perhaps with an activist perspective, or for readers seeking to understand the approaches outlined or how to employ them. The authors aim not to describe the world but rather to change it to make society more equitable and less hierarchical. Of course, this stance itself is controversial in that it has the sort of built-in bias that traditionally has been deplored in research, even though (as this collection argues) bias and ideology exist regardless of the presence of controls designed to mitigate or eliminate them.

I imagine that doctoral students will find the book provocative and also, I hope, problematic because of the false dichotomy that provides the positioning of much of what is advocated there. In summarizing the state of composition research in post-secondary education from 1984 to 2003, Durst (2006) concluded that

Presently, the field lacks a defining feature or powerful orthodoxy *within* composition studies to work against, such as current-traditional teaching or the cognitive emphasis. And in the past, it has been the idea of working against an oppressive status quo

that most strongly motivated composition scholars to develop exciting new interpretations and approaches. (p. 98)

The absence of a monolithic foe against which to position oneself is not a problem for the contributors to this collection. Indeed, the volume’s title is a bit misleading in that education research is not the topic of the book. Rather, the editors and authors come from a particular perspective within the broad and teeming world of education research. They explicitly position themselves against a vague behemoth that they generally label *positivism*, an antagonist that remains largely undefined in this volume yet is offered as the sort of “oppressive status quo” that once energized the field of composition studies.

One way to establish this volume’s perspective is simply to provide a list of recurring terms that appear across the chapters. First, “positivism” is invoked on many occasions, but only the penultimate chapter offers a clear definition (from “Steven” [*sic*] Hawking—one of a myriad of copyediting errors in the book). Prior to that, readers learn of positivism largely through a series of pejorative references. It is characterized as “Eurocentric,” “male,” “regressive,” “repressive,” “oppressive,” “one-truth,” “hegemonic,” “totalizing,” “patriarchal,” “monologic,” “monolithic,” “reductionist,” “arrogant,” “scientistic,” “so-called evidence based,” “colonial,” “controlling,” “privileged,” “hyper-rationalistic,” “pseudo-rigorous,” “hierarchical,” “oriented to Truth,” “unjust,” “elitist,” “white-centered,” “silencing,” “subjugating,” “essentializing,” “weak,” “dull-minded,” “detached,” “objective,” “exclusionary,” “epistemologically naive,” and “decontextualized”; and to boot, it’s a scam and a quagmire, it involves surveillance, it marginalizes and regulates, it has a “chokehold on individual and social freedom” (p. 8), and it has the “power”

invested in “the educational research establishment” to send “to Hell” those who resist efforts “to normalize, subjugate, domesticate” them (p. 225). Yikes, who’d want to be on that team?

In contrast, the editors and authors in this collection recurrently describe their own approach as “emancipatory,” “reflexive,” “feminist,” “postmodern,” “postcolonial,” “poststructural,” “complex,” “liberatory,” “progressive,” “Foucauldian,” “Derridian,” “trailblazing,” “innovative,” “humble,” “counter-positivistic,” “authentic,” “democratic,” “critical,” “just,” “revolutionary,” “activist,” “moral,” “inquiring,” and “connected.” The authors are said to engage in “the process of making a difference” (p. 62) because of their “moral obligation to be agents of change” (p. 63) as they strive to “decolonize the mind” (p. 320). The editors and authors also encourage us to avoid binaries and to refrain from essentializing “the other” in our scholarship. At the same time, they establish “positivism” as a straw man (and I use this masculine term deliberately in accord with the “male” traits explicitly associated with “positivism” in this volume) that is blown away by a torrent of derogatory terms yet never engaged thoughtfully.

Among my many concerns about this argument is my doubt about the extent to which a positivistic monolith really exists. Perhaps my own positioning contributes to this doubt. I work in the field of English education, which is dominated by women and qualitative research. With Michael W. Smith, I co-edited *Research in the Teaching of English* from 1997 to 2003, and I would estimate that at least 95% of the articles submitted during our term were qualitative in nature; and of the roughly 100 articles we published during our term, only 1 used a quasi-experimental design. I teach in the University of Georgia’s College of Education, which is known for its qualitative research orientation, if not orthodoxy. In my department of about 20 faculty, only 2 do statistical research. One of them is retiring and has referred to himself as the resident “dinosaur,” and the other is, of all things, a woman—and a self-described feminist at that. I am among the great majority in my department whose research falls broadly beneath the qualitative umbrella. I have published enough to keep me going, and my work has been funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Educational Research and Improvement, the Spencer Foundation, and the

Research Foundation of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). I served on and chaired the NCTE Research Foundation and cannot remember funding a single experimental study during my 5-year term; it is likely, indeed, that we did not even receive any proposals for number-crunching studies. At least in my corner of the field, then, the idea of a positivist monolith is hard to take seriously.

I am aware of course that the U.S. government often insists on experimental and quasi-experimental designs as those best suited to reveal truths about effective instruction. (As we know, the government abandons its admiration of science in connection with science curriculum policy and more general public policy issues such as global warming.) The government’s belief in scientific studies has its main influence in funding for education research. The government also may withhold funds for schools and districts that do not implement the curriculum changes that follow from experimental research findings. But the government is only one gatekeeper, and an ephemeral one at that, given the frequency of elections that changes the landscape every few years. I would say that our profession’s more influential gatekeepers are its journal editors. It may be myopic to offer my particular field as a sample of education research as a whole, but I know of very few journals that require an experimental study as a requirement for publication, and I know of a number of journals with explicitly qualitative orientations (e.g., *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*). From my perspective then, if there is a monolith in the field, it is the one advocated in *Doing Educational Research*, not the one that the book’s contributors find so oppressive.

Although the editors decry the “bankrupt dichotomy of qualitative and quantitative research methods” (p. 13)—a rejection that I endorse—that dichotomy is effectively what they uphold in this collection. Thus, I find one of their driving premises to be deeply flawed. Even so, I believe that the book has a good deal to offer for the critical and perhaps skeptical reader. I believe that graduate students could benefit from engaging with these chapters, particularly if the students have an informed grounding in the approach against which the book argues. Investigating educational issues has come to require sophisticated and complex approaches, and this book provides its readers with a host of approaches that may yield

insight into the vexing challenges of teaching and learning in a diverse society.

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## Research and the “Inner Circle”: The Need to Set Aside Counterproductive Language

A Review by  
Nancy L. Leech

The debate on what constitutes “scientific” research in the field of education has endured for decades (Jacob & White, 2002). Recently, with the No Child Left Behind Act and grant agencies focusing almost exclusively on quantitative, experimental studies, many researchers feel left out of the “inner circle” of money, prestige, and distinction. If quantitative research is the research that is valued, then qualitative research—and thus the qualitative researcher—is left out. Thus, it is understandable that some qualitative researchers are frustrated and angry. Unfortunately, being angry and using unnecessarily provocative language when referring to quantitative research or quantitative researchers does not help to further qualitative research; instead, it perpetuates the division between qualitative and quantitative researchers.

*Doing Educational Research: A Handbook*, edited by Kenneth Tobin and Joe Kincheloe, is written primarily for students, although also for “individual researchers and research

groups” (p. 13). One of the strengths of the text is that its 17 chapters are written by a diverse group of authors. Each chapter is new and interesting to the reader because each author has his or her own style of presenting information. Furthermore, the chapters discuss a range of qualitative research topics. The variety of topics makes the text potentially useful for students and beginning researchers who wish to conduct multiple types of qualitative research studies. An additional strength of the text is the consistency with which the authors advocate social change and giving every participant a voice.

Two chapters are outstanding. One, written by Kenneth Tobin, discusses qualitative research in the classroom. It includes (a) specific information (including examples of forms) on obtaining institutional review board (IRB) approval, (b) a discussion of how to conduct research in the classroom, and (c) ideas for facilitating research participation by students. Throughout the chapter, Tobin includes excellent examples that bring the concepts to life for the reader. Another outstanding chapter, written by Michael Wolff-Roth, focuses on conversation analysis. Wolff-Roth explains in a clear, step-by-step fashion how to undertake conversation analysis. Also covered are possible technical problems, the limitations of conversation analysis, and a list of Web-based resources.

Throughout the rest of the text, however, are a multitude of problematic assertions, in particular those regarding quantitative research. Other problems include the title of the book, the presentation of the material in many of the chapters, and grammatical errors. First, the title, *Doing Educational Research: A Handbook*, is misleading. It leads the reader to expect that the book will address education research as a whole, which includes many viewpoints, paradigms, and research traditions, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Unfortunately, the book discusses research only from the qualitative viewpoint, offering no discussion of quantitative or mixed methods research. Although there is no problem with discussing only qualitative research, the title should reflect the subject matter. Furthermore, the text does not consistently discuss *doing* education research. As noted earlier, two chapters provide in-depth, step-by-step guidelines for conducting research, but most chapters fall disappointingly short of that goal. In fact, some

of the chapters focus on theoretical concepts and do not even attempt to explain how to conduct the type of research under discussion.

Of paramount concern however is the unnecessarily divisive language used throughout the text. In the chapter that introduces the text, the editors state,

Educational researchers must have the skill and will to fend off the regressive purveyors of one-truth, monological, and reductionistic ways of viewing education. In this context the researchers who crafted this book provide alternatives to the arrogance of positivist reductionism with a radical humility, a fallibilism, an awareness of the complexity of our task. . . . Critical, yet humble, we push for something better. (pp. 4–5)

Later, the editors state, “All of the authors of *Doing Educational Research* attempt in their own way . . . [to] avoid reductionism” (p. 6). From statements such as these, it is clear that the authors believe quantitative research is synonymous with positivism.

Unfortunately, many people appear to misunderstand positivism. According to Hacking (1983), logical positivism (a) emphasizes verification, (b) denies the existence of metaphysical and transcendental reality, (c) opposes attempts at causal explanation, (d) downplays efforts to explain phenomena, (e) rejects concepts and theories regarding the unobservable, and (f) emphasizes logical analysis. In contrast to what the editors claim, none of these tenets describes quantitative research since World War II (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). For example, the editors claim that education researchers can use *Doing Educational Research* to “fend off the regressive purveyors of one-truth” (p. 4), thereby fending off the so-called one-truth quantitative perspective in research. This claim is misleading. Many quantitative researchers do not believe in a single truth. In fact, the mainstream Bayesian approach is based on *subjective* beliefs; the researcher works backward from the effect to the cause with probability being a degree of belief.

Unfortunately, throughout the text the negative aspects of viewing education research through a monological lens are supported. For example, Berry states, “What has emerged over the past two decades still tends to support a *monological* process of conducting research in the arts . . . and . . . education” (p. 89). She defines monological as “one way only of thinking about research,

one logic,” and adds, “but whose counts?” (p. 114). Interestingly, mixed methods research is not mentioned as a solution when monological research is negated.

The editors assert that quantitative researchers are reductionist, in the sense of reducing phenomena and experiences to their components. Interestingly, it can also be argued that some qualitative researchers are reductionist. For example, qualitative researchers commonly convert experiences to words and then to themes. This process of reduction is very similar to quantitative researchers’ process of converting experiences to variables. As noted by Yu (2003), positivism has long been replaced in all types of research (including quantitative research) with other philosophies of science. Yet the contributors to this book and many other qualitative researchers continue to use the tenets of positivism to bolster their research archetypes.

Another problematic issue is the presentation of the material in many of the chapters. For years, qualitative research has been seen as a members-only club (Constas, 1992); those with insider knowledge of how to conduct qualitative research are believed to be the only researchers capable of carrying out a study using qualitative methods. Keeping this perspective alive, many of the chapters in this book are unclear; readers will find it difficult to understand the methods presented or to apply them in their own work. This divisive approach creates huge misunderstandings for students and beginning researchers. There is a need for qualitative texts that are clear and understandable and that include step-by-step guidelines for doing qualitative research. Unfortunately, most of the chapters in the present text do not delineate the methods; they only create more mystery around them.

Finally, there are many problems in the writing and editing throughout the text. First, the chapters are not coherently linked together, even though the book appears to be written in a logical order (i.e., the second chapter includes a discussion on IRB approvals and the final chapter is titled “When the Research’s Over, Don’t Turn Out the Lights”). Unfortunately, the chapters in between do not help a beginning researcher learn how to conduct qualitative research from start to finish. Also, there are a large number of grammatically incorrect sentences and violations of common editorial guidelines; most problematic is that some



text citations lack corresponding reference list entries.

At the end of the day, most, if not all, education researchers have the same goal—to improve the lives of students. It is understandable that qualitative researchers would like to participate in the inner circle of so-called acceptable research. Furthermore, it is clear that they need to be heard and seen as researchers. All of us, as researchers, need to set aside the counterproductive language of name-calling and divisive grouping. By doing so, we can create an environment where students and beginning researchers will learn that education research is a positive enterprise in which qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research each have important roles to play.

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## A Response to “Research and the ‘Inner Circle’: The Need to Set Aside Counterproductive Language,” by Nancy L. Leech

Response by  
Peter Smagorinsky

Let there be no doubt: Nancy Leech and I have read the same book. Although I perhaps found more of value in individual chapters in this collection, we appear to agree that its reliance on what we believe to be a spurious dichotomy between qualitative and “positivist” research greatly detracts from the book’s merits. We are further alarmed by its countless copy errors; in addition to the grammatical problems and missing citations noted by Leech, words are often repeated in or omitted from sentences. On one egregious occasion, an author’s inserted note to the production staff is included in the middle of a sentence. Clearly, somebody was asleep at the wheel in preparing the final version of this book, and the product suffers.

One issue that our review raises is the nature of the book’s bogeyman, “positivism.” Leech associates it fairly directly with quantitative research, but it is not clear exactly what the contributors to this volume think it is. Rather, it is simply offered axiomatically as a monolith that this bold, humble, courageous group of conscience-driven warriors hopes to topple. (I should note that most, but not all, of the book’s authors take this stance; a few simply get on with their work, as I would hope they would.)

The specter of “positivism” and the tendency to argue in terms of binaries raises some interesting questions for our field. First, I hope that someone out there can produce a paper that traces the prototypical notion of positivism and how it fits epistemologically with the culture of its origins, and then traces its development through time. In particular, this paper should show how positivism has been appropriated into education research from the natural sciences and exactly what the consequences have been of this movement to the social sciences. Part of the project ought to be to tease out the separate but often overlapping notions of positivism, scientific research, and quantitative approaches to investigating educational

questions. Ideally, this investigation would be conducted by someone both knowledgeable and disinterested. In the likely absence of such a person, the author should at least be wise and respectful of the traditions under consideration.

For me, a second question raised by the binary is to what extent “scientific” research has a monopoly on the field of education research. We could get an idea by doing some simple classifying and counting of what is currently getting published. Perhaps a sample of 100 influential journals could be examined over a 5-year period, with a set of raters categorizing them according to research paradigm—with attention not only to quantitative or qualitative character but also to more nuanced information about the theoretical frameworks, the specific methodologies, and other issues of epistemology that inform and shape the investigations. Such a study would help to settle the apparently unanswered question of who controls our enterprise and what that means for how we work.

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## A Response to “A Thick Description of Thick Description,” by Peter Smagorinsky

Response by  
Nancy L. Leech

In reading Peter Smagorinsky’s review of *Doing Educational Research*, I was immediately impressed by our similar perspectives. Given that he describes himself in his review as a qualitative researcher, it is truly amazing that we see eye to eye on so many aspects. I am a pragmatist; I have a healthy respect for qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research. I teach graduate-level courses in qualitative and quantitative methods, and I enjoy helping students and colleagues understand how the research question should drive the choice of methods. I do not believe that we need to sit in one camp (either qualitative or quantitative) and force our investigations to fit into our views of the world.

I read *Doing Educational Research* with great interest, as I am constantly looking

for texts to use in my qualitative research course. In contrast to Smagorinsky's view, this text is not one I would choose to use with my students. The authors are not all experts in the field; and, of even greater concern, the text is yet another "guess how to do it" qualitative research text.

Students need to learn from experts. *Webster's New World College Dictionary* defines an expert as "a person who is very skillful or highly trained and informed in some special field" (Agnes & Guralnik, 2002, p. 500). In academia, expertise is commonly exemplified by publishing and becoming nationally known. The contributors to *Doing Educational Research* hold diverse positions, including research chair; researcher; assistant, associate or full professor; presidential professor; associate dean; teacher; lecturer; and doctoral student. Some have published articles

and books; others are listed as not having published. It is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain how all of these authors can be considered experts.

My other issue with the book is the lack of guidance in how to do qualitative research. A multitude of qualitative texts are available (and now, with the publication of *Doing Educational Research*, there is one more) that do not present how to actually do qualitative research. Most students do not come prepared with qualitative research skills; research methods, or the how-to, must be taught. What the field needs most is qualitative texts that include step-by-step guides for conducting a research study, not lists of opinions or examples of how studies were conducted. Many students do not learn by example; they need simple guidance on how and when to negotiate each step of the investigation.

True, some qualitative researchers might argue that step-by-step guidance creates a sense of there being only one way to conduct qualitative research. Yet very few, if any, activities are taught to novices without specific guidelines or steps. We need to move beyond the privatization of qualitative research. If students are not told the best practices in qualitative research, then we as a research community cannot expect novice qualitative researchers to conduct rigorous research studies.

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