

## Editors' Introduction

Early in our term as editors, we sent an article to *RTE* Editorial Board member Bob Fecho to review for possible publication. As is our policy, we included a letter outlining our recommended guidelines for writing reviews. When Bob sent us his review of the article, he included a note saying, "In addition to the issues you highlighted in your questions, in my review I commented on the writing. Maybe you want to think about adding a question to ask reviewers to comment on whether the writing is clear and engaging."

It seems such an obvious question to ask, yet we didn't ask it. Our guidelines asked reviewers to assess the quality of the theoretical background, the importance of the research questions, the way that the data were collected and analyzed, and so on. Our lack of attention to the writing itself suggested to Bob that we believed that the quality of the writing shouldn't be a factor in evaluating a manuscript.

After receiving Bob's note we revised our letter to reviewers. In addition to asking their view of the manuscript's qualities with respect to theoretical framework, research design, and other such considerations, we now request that they evaluate the lucidity of the author's prose. We foreground this issue in our editorial in order to highlight two reasons why the quality of an article's writing ought to be an important concern for us as editors.

The first has to do with how we conceive of the journal. As we wrote in the May 1997 issue, we see *RTE* as a very inclusive journal, both in terms of topic and methodology. We have received articles on a great variety of topics, written in many different forms. While the most characteristic article submitted to *RTE* continues to be an APA-style research report of literacy teaching and learning in an English/Language Arts class, we have reviewed articles on topics that inform English/Language Arts instruction without focusing on it. In this issue of *RTE*, for instance, we publish two articles that are not specifically about the teaching of English. Deborah Hicks analyzes a discussion in an elementary school science lesson as a way to illustrate her theoretical argument about the need for a synthesis between whole language and genre theory assumptions. Anne Beaufort studies a corporation as a site of overlapping discourse communities, with an emphasis on the role of writing on the corporation's functions. Margaret Mackey takes on a more conventional topic for *RTE* readers, response to literature, but provides a unique view of reading by studying it as a real-time, contingent process. Because we are trying to be inclusive about what counts as "research in the teaching

of English," we can assume that every article we publish will not meet the immediate needs and interests of every reader. Yet we hope that every article will be of potential interest to our readers and that each will inform their conceptions of literacy practices in some way. In approaching articles of potential rather than immediate relevance, readers are likely to be somewhat outside the area of specialization of the author. In such cases clear and engaging writing is especially important. Most *RTE* subscribers are pressed for time and quickly grow impatient with articles that don't compel them to read on. A well-wrought article on an unfamiliar topic is more likely to hold readers than one that, while technically competent, is written in uninviting or inaccessible prose. We see the quality of writing, then, as a factor in contributing to a more widely-read, better informed subscribership.

The second reason we wish to stress the quality of scholarly writing has to do with the ethos of the writer. In his oft-cited critique of quantitative research, Graves (1980) writes that teachers find it to be of "limited value" (p. 914), in large measure because it is "written in a language guaranteed for self-extinction" (p. 918). Graves was very influential in both promoting qualitative studies and in getting writers to write well. Among his goals was to encourage the publication of research that would be read by teachers as well as university researchers. To Graves (1979), research conducted and reported under the auspices of science excludes the nonspecialist, in particular the teacher. "Research," he said, "doesn't have to be boring" (1979, p. 76), but rather can and should be written in language that reflects the vitality of classrooms. Graves's concern was that research is inaccessible to K-12 teachers because it is rendered in a form that "smells of musty bookcases and crusty language" (1979, p. 76). We share his concern that research is unlikely to affect K-12 practice if primary and secondary teachers find it unreadable. We also see the need for research to be written well for readers at postsecondary institutions, where pedagogy also matters and where people prefer a good read to a bad one. If research is to invigorate the field, then we feel it should be written with vigor as well as rigor.

We see, however, the issue of language as having a conceptual dimension that goes beyond its accessibility. We suspect that teachers' distrust of much research is rooted at least in part by the ethos communicated by the writer. Hillocks (1995) argues that "every piece presents a set of cues that an astute audience will use to construct a picture of the writer. Writers ignore those cues at their peril" (p. 90). Hayes (1992) found that that the stakes can be high when readers construe a personality based on textual clues. He studied college admissions officers who, when reading applicants' admissions essays, constructed representations of candidates' personalities in ways that had strong implications for their admissions decisions. In scholarly publications, if a writer's prose encourages a con-

struction of a picture of someone who is, and if that picture doesn't jibe with the makes an effective educator, then the research what it says but rather for who the writer

The issue of ethos seems important in less of the paradigm adopted. As argued *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies* (Kirsch, 1996), qualitative researchers face in the way they collect and report their data depends in part upon the trust their audience part of that trust stems from the care with which they justify their methods. But it seems to us that through the way that they write. If readers them with concern and respect, it's much has extended that respect to those with whom the study.

Perhaps the point is obvious: The way But either it wasn't obvious to us when we reviewers, or we took it for granted. We don't make the same mistake. In this is which the authors articulate their ideas articles discuss difficult concepts, they When we read them we constructed pictures who were sensitive to other people and about the consequences of their studies, a cation and the role of research in informing their work with you.

P. S. M. W. S.

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struction of a picture of someone who is, say, dispassionate or arrogant, and if that picture doesn't jibe with the reader's conception of what makes an effective educator, then the research may be dismissed not for what it says but rather for who the writer appears to be.

The issue of ethos seems important in any report of research, regardless of the paradigm adopted. As argued in the recent NCTE publication *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy* (Mortensen & Kirsch, 1996), qualitative researchers face a wide variety of ethical issues in the way they collect and report their data. The impact of their reports depends in part upon the trust their audience has in them. To be sure, part of that trust stems from the care with which researchers explain and justify their methods. But it seems to us that they also earn (or lose) trust through the way that they write. If readers feel that a writer is treating them with concern and respect, it's much easier to believe that the writer has extended that respect to those with whom the writer worked during the study.

Perhaps the point is obvious: The way a paper is written is important. But either it wasn't obvious to us when we first wrote our guidelines for reviewers, or we took it for granted. We hope those who submit to *RTE* don't make the same mistake. In this issue we feature three articles in which the authors articulate their ideas with great care. Although the articles discuss difficult concepts, they do so clearly and engagingly. When we read them we constructed pictures of the authors as colleagues who were sensitive to other people and their literacy needs, who cared about the consequences of their studies, and who were committed to education and the role of research in informing it. We're delighted to share their work with you.

P. S. M. W. S.

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