Editors’ Introduction

As editors we continually ask ourselves on what basis we decide whether to accept an article for publication in RTE. We have found that articulating the criteria for acceptance is difficult, in part because our field has prepared us better to think about what makes an article not publishable. The reviewers we enlist typically base their recommendations on problems in research design, execution, or presentation; that is, reviewers, undoubtedly because they have been enculturated to be highly critical, tend to provide extensive and well-reasoned arguments for why an article is not appropriate for publication in RTE. As reviewers for other journals, we find ourselves taking the same critical, selective stance. Finding problems with articles and determining why to exclude them from publication suits the critical academic mind quite well.

Much more vexing is the question of which qualities distinguish a publishable article. Each manuscript is problematic in some way, with reviewers making extensive suggestions for revisions in almost every case. Our decisions to publish articles come in spite of these concerns. Putting our finger on the qualities that distinguish those manuscripts that we publish from those that we don’t has been a major theme in our ongoing conversation about editing RTE. When engaged in public discussions about the qualities that characterize RTE articles, we have often described them in terms of the author’s establishment of a theoretical framework, integrity of design, warranting of claims, and other textbook attributes of research. Yet we have not always been wholly satisfied that, at the end of these discussions, we have answered clearly for others or ourselves what essential traits an article should have in order to be accepted for publication in RTE.

To assist us, we have discussed this question with a number of people. One such conversation took place with former RTE co-editors Judith Langer and Arthur Applebee. Thinking back to their editorial term, Judith and Arthur said that one defining characteristic of a publishable article was that it be of archival quality. While somewhat ambiguous, this term resonated with both of us, seeming to capture what we’d always understood about RTE and the articles it publishes. In this editorial we’d like to begin a discussion of how the notion of archival significance can help us clarify what we are looking for in RTE articles.

Archives function as the repository of significant public records. They thus serve a historic purpose: Artifacts that are stored in archives serve as landmarks in documenting a community’s development. They serve as key reference points in understanding critical moments in a group’s history. Like all such critical historical documents, they also provide or
imply a path for future development. They thus are artifactual in a very vital way. Cole (1996) has described the role of artifacts in cultural history: “Culture... can be understood as the entire pool of artifacts accumulated by the social group in the course of its historical experience. In the aggregate, the accumulated artifacts of a group—culture—is then seen as the species-specific medium of human development. It is ‘history in the present’” (p. 110). Those artifacts that a community recognizes as archival have particular influence on cultural history, both that which has transpired and that which now unfolds.

We see this notion of archival quality as being very useful for considering manuscripts for possible publication in RTE. It is a notion particularly well-suited to RTE’s unique role as the designated research journal of the National Council of Teachers of English. It helps us think beyond the accepted standards for evaluating research. Like any other academic journal, we claim to maintain high standards for what we publish. We have tried to articulate those standards in previous editorials. In the October 1997 RTE, for instance, we outlined a set of considerations that reviewers make when reviewing articles for RTE. In that editorial we were concerned with issues of genre and how review criteria might vary depending on the author’s epistemology and the resultant formal properties of a manuscript. We discussed such areas as the theoretical motivation for research and an author’s faithfulness to a theoretical framework across the sections of an article; the responsibility, sufficiency, and ethics of research conduct; and the warranting of claims made from data. These are crucial considerations for authors and reviewers to examine and typically serve as the basis for recommendations for or against publishing an article.

While fundamental, these criteria do not direct our attention to the historical contribution that an article might make to a field. This potential for landmark recognition, we feel, is a critical trait that an RTE article should have. An article’s potential for contributing to a field’s continuing development, long after publication, distinguishes it as having archival quality. Such articles serve as significant artifacts in a field’s cultural history. Determining what will have future influence is, of course, a subjective and speculative undertaking. When considering articles submitted to RTE, we base our determination primarily upon whether a study is likely to change or extend the way the field thinks about or chooses to investigate an issue of significance.

One trait that characterizes an archival investigation is that the researcher undertakes the study of a significant problem. An issue’s significance is not so much a quality of the object of study itself, but instead is a consequence of the way in which a researcher frames and studies it.

A related question is that of novelty—that is, should a study contribute something new? Is significance only to studies that do not replicate prior research, or can a study extend and still have archival potential? Again, the function of the way in which a topic is conceptualized and formulated. Very few questions have found definitive answers to this question. A researcher who attempts to make a compelling contribution to a field can do so only through a persp...
Artifacts in cultural history are artificial in a very real sense. They are artifacts in a cultural historical experience. In group—cultures—are then valued. It is in the history of the community that both that which has been recognized as history, both that which has been useful for considering research journals, and what we publish. We recognize articles as the theoretical model to a theoretical framework, sufficiency, and the claims made from data. When reviewers examine articles for or against publication, our attention to the history of a field. This potential trait that an article identifies a field is continuing to influence it as having artifacts in a field’s cultural influence is, of course, considering articles sub- mitted to the reviews of articles published in different classroom activities. The reviewers of this article identified a quality that conceivably will enable it to affect educators’ thinking for years to come, that being its effort to make simplistic ways of characterizing students problematic. In the words of one reviewer: “I really enjoyed your paper and am convinced of its value—for classroom teachers and academics alike. . .” By applying the various lenses (trait theory, social constructivist theory, neo-Marxist theory & pos-
structuralist theory), you offered a rich, layered account and effectively challenged the deterministic, reductionist and essentialist tendencies of the ‘learning styles’ movement.” McCarthy’s analysis provides a way to use different theoretical perspectives in complementary ways to help understand students’ performance as they move across contexts, an analytic approach that may become increasingly useful as studies examine microgenetic events across contexts to help explain situated performance. In “The ESL Teacher as Moral Agent” Bill Johnston, Andrea Juhász, James Marken, and Beverly Rolfs Ruiz analyze the categories of moral influence in a number of ESL classrooms. Although the reviewers were impressed that the study raised questions that were seldom asked about ESL teaching, their praise for the study extended beyond its novelty. As one reviewer noted, “By combining moral inquiry with a species of qualitative research, the authors potentially can offer both a fine-grained analysis of the smallest of teaching acts as well as critique the false hopes that many of us have about conservative, liberal, or radical pedagogies.” Their study convincingly demonstrates both the extent to which morality and teaching are intertwined in ESL classrooms and the usefulness of their analytical framework in making that realization. Their willingness to look hard at their own practice demonstrates a kind of reflection we feel will be evocative for teachers in a variety of contexts. In “Grammar as Resource: Writing a Description” Mary Schleppegrell takes a functional grammatical approach to analyzing students’ texts. At a time when many educators accept the axiom that grammar instruction does not improve writing, Schleppegrell argues that grammatical knowledge of a certain sort is crucial when writing in unfamiliar genres. The reviewers of her paper noted that her method has potential not just as a research tool but as a pedagogical tool as well. In the words of one of them: “The study shows the diagnostic tools that a functional approach to grammar makes possible, at least for teachers: The theory relates linguistic forms to the functions they serve and makes salient the crucial forms that realize a given genre; thus it provides the teacher with a critical focus when introducing new genres of school writing.” By asking an old question in a new way, Schleppegrell’s study will, we feel, energize the conversation about the importance of direct instruction in language for the teaching of writing.

The authors studied different topics using different methods. They call upon different theoretical frameworks. Yet they are similar in that they offer literacy educators tools that will allow them to see students, teachers, and classrooms in new ways. We hope that our readers will find those ways of seeing as compelling as we and the reviewers did.

In this editorial we have tried to share one crucial type of contribution that we think is important in our field. We do not expect agreement on what that contribution is, but we do wish, however, to identify what we look for in articles we publish. We offer this list in the hope that our readers will begin to consider and discuss it so that we can make their thoughts public may do so through the RTE website. We welcome your ideas in the personal and collective understanding of how our study of writing can be made stronger, more robust, more vital, and better. PS. M.W.S.

RTE Web Site Information

Please note that the RTE Web site will move to a new home in July 1998. The RTE World Wide Web site http://www.rtehome.htm has been designed as a resource to complement the print version of the journal. Through the Web site, we hope to provide a number of services that we hope will encourage interaction among researchers. To help acquaint RTE readers with this new site, we will highlight an area of possible interest.

In this issue we feature the RTE/Assembly Directory, accessible from the home page of the RTE World Wide Web site at http://www.rtehome.htm. The RTE/Assembly Directory for Research at NCTE Assembly for Research at http://www.ncte.org/assembly provides a directory of those people who share interests so that they can find each other and contact researchers who share their interests. To contact someone, simply type in key words such as a name or a topic that interests you. The RTE/Assembly Directory will highlight an area of possible interest.

We encourage you to visit the RTE Web site, provide a window that you can use to send your name in the assembly directory, and otherwise connect with other people who share interests so that they can find each other and contact researchers who share their interests. If you have ideas for improving the web site, please use the Suggestions page or e-mail them directly to our-rte@ou.edu.

PS. M.W.S.
In this editorial we have tried to share our developing thoughts about a crucial type of contribution that we think RTE articles will make to the field. We do not expect agreement on which articles have archival significance. We do wish, however, to identify this trait as among those we look for in articles we publish. We offer these thoughts in the hopes that our readers will begin to consider and discuss the issue. Those who wish to make their thoughts public may do so at the Reader’s Forum at the RTE website. We welcome your ideas in the hopes of developing our personal and collective understanding of how research can contribute to a stronger, more robust, more vital, and better informed field.

P.S. M.W.S.

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In this issue we feature the RTE/Assembly for Research Directory, which is accessible from the home page of the RTE Web site and from the Web site of the NCTE Assembly for Research at http://www.lfc.edu/education/NCTEAR/. The RTE/Assembly for Research Directory is designed to help researchers locate other people who share interests so that they can develop networks, exchange papers and ideas, and otherwise connect with people throughout the field with whom they wish to develop professional relationships. You can search the directory by typing in key words such as a name or a topic to help locate people who share your interests. To contact someone, simply click on the name and you’ll be provided a window that you can use to send an e-mail message.

We encourage you to visit the RTE Web site, where we hope you will enter your name in the RTE/Assembly for Research Directory and search the directory for researchers who share your interests. If you have any suggestions about how to improve the web site, please use the Suggestion Box you’ll find on the home page or e-mail them directly to ou-rte@ou.edu.

P.S. M.W.S.