EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

When teachers enter their classrooms on the first day of classes, what do they see? Do they notice the racial make-up of the class? Do they look at the gender balance? Do they see their students' clothing and infer their social class? If teachers do notice students' characteristics and use them to anticipate their performance, are they misreading or subconsciously contributing to those performances through their expectations? If they don't attend to their students' traits, are they ignoring crucial areas of difference and using their own cultural norms as the standard for viewing their students? These questions can be subsumed by a bigger one: Are there categories that have explanatory power in understanding human behavior?

Researchers have been paying increasing attention that crucial question. A quick look at the "Annotated Bibliography of Research in the Teaching English" by Deborah Brown, Melissa E. Whiting, and Richard L. Larson in the November, 1998 *RTE* illustrates this tendency well. In the studies reviewed, researchers offered such categories as home language, race, ethnicity, birth order, gender, age, ability track, and level of experience/expertise as categories that are useful in accounting for learners' performances. Some of the most influential researchers in our field have done groundbreaking work in revealing the ways in which membership in a category is associated with people's ways of thinking, interacting, and performing. Tannen's (1993, 1994) research, for example, reveals the different ways in which men and women use language, suggesting that the category of gender is useful for understanding how people interact socially and has important implications for understanding classroom interactions. But categories can also have unintended and unfortunate consequences, for in viewing people categorically one risks essentializing the diverse people who are members of the same group. As Torres (1992) warns, research on gender and language has become increasingly complex "as researchers have realized that the question of sex or gender differences in language is intimately related to other issues such as race, social class, and social roles. . . . It is now clear that one cannot speak of universal sex difference in language" (p. 281). The use of categories, then, while potentially illuminating, is also potentially a slippery slope that can result in oversimplified views of groups of people. We recall the words

of Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen (1975), who said, "We classify at our peril. Experiments have shown that even the lightest touch of the classifier's hand is likely to induce us to see members of a class as more alike than they actually are, and items from different classes as less alike than they actually are" (p.1). Their caution is as resonant today as it was when issued nearly twenty-five years ago.

Each of the articles in this issue of *RTE* recognizes the complexity of viewing human performance in terms of an individual's membership in a group. Ellen Cushman takes issue with the ways in which some critical theorists have conflated poverty and false consciousness due to an oversimplified assumption of the urban poor's acquiescence to oppression. Using what she terms an activist ethnography, Cushman spent many months sharing intimate experiences with people on the edges of poverty, with particular attention to their means of negotiating social services institutions following their evictions from apartments. Based on her close, long-term involvement with her participants, Cushman found that rather than having the false consciousness sometimes attributed to people in poverty, her case study participants instead employed a sophisticated critical consciousness in order to acquire the resources available through the social services bureaucracy. Cushman does not deny the usefulness of the category of what is commonly termed the disempowered or the marginalized, but argues instead that in applying this category, researchers, particularly when they make their observations from a distance, too often overlook the critical consciousness and agency that people on the margins develop in order to cope.

Like Cushman, Lowry Hemphill also uses social class as a category, exploring the relationship between social class and narrative style and inferring how class-based narrative style might affect the way that students respond to poetry. She looks carefully at the structural characteristics of students' narratives and their responses to poetry and analyzes the semantic worlds upon which they draw in constructing their stories and responses. Her article extends previous research in sociolinguistics that considers the relationships between students' primary discourses and the secondary discourses they acquire in school. Hemphill, while not engaging in the sort of ethnographic "study *in* villages" (Geertz, 1973, p. 22; emphasis in original) that characterizes Cushman's approach, uses protocol analysis as a method of engaging in close, careful study of her participants' literacy practices. Through her effort to associate students' social class, the tendency of social class to predict narrative structure, and the likelihood that the form of personal narratives will influence how readers respond to new texts, Hemphill establishes why social class might be implicated in how students respond to literary texts. Assuming that the category of social class matters, she argues that explicit attention to discourse differences should inform English curricula and instructional practice.

Janis Harmon examines a category that has, we think, become reified in

schools: the good reader. Harmon enriches the conception of what this category might mean in two important ways. In the first place, she focuses on students' encounters with unfamiliar words, an understudied dimension of reading, yet one upon which important curricular decisions are grounded. Secondly, she uses protocol analysis as a way of studying two proficient readers in considerable detail, allowing her to provide an in-depth analysis of the strategies they employ. In so doing, Harmon provides teachers and researchers with portraits of how proficient adolescent readers negotiate their encounters with new words when reading literature. Like most studies of this depth, her work necessarily focuses on a small sample and thus cannot claim to establish what all good readers do. However, understanding what these good readers do can help educators understand how they might help students develop their vocabularies and what role independent reading might have in that process.

As the articles in this issue suggest, there are both risks and rewards in using categories to think with. These studies also demonstrate that maximizing the rewards and minimizing the risks of categorizing people requires both insight into what is consequential and great care in analyzing the behavior associated with membership in a given group. When we began our editorial term, one of our first decisions was to allow space for longer articles that answer research questions in greater detail. While this decision has meant the publication of fewer articles, we are confident that the field will be rewarded by studies that more rigorously investigate the details and complexity of life in classrooms and the social worlds in which they are enacted. We offer this powerful set of studies as evidence of the importance of the careful analysis of behaviors associated with the social categories through which we view ourselves and other people.

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