Questions of Cultures

When we were in graduate school in the 1980's, social science research was largely indebted to the cognitive sciences. It was quite common to conduct studies to identify teaching approaches that worked in contrast to those that didn't work so well or to study writing and reading processes as strictly cognitive. Such studies tended to focus on production or mentation itself and pay only peripheral attention to cultural variables. The publication of articles based on our own dissertations, where we studied the effects of teaching methods without extensively accounting for the settings in which they were employed, reflects this emphasis (see Smagorinsky, 1991; Smith, 1989).

In recent years, however, researchers have begun to focus increasingly on the role of culture in learning and teaching. The cultural emphasis that has come to dominate the 1990s was brewing throughout the 1980s, with researchers beginning to establish arguments about the social, interactive, dialogic nature of literacy (e.g., Miller, 1984; Nystrand, 1986). These arguments themselves were dialogic, drawing on and speaking to prior scholarship in sociolinguistics (e.g., Hymes, 1974), literary theory (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981), psychology (e.g., Scribner & Cole, 1981), anthropology (e.g., Heath, 1983), communication (e.g., Mehan, 1979), philosophy (e.g., Peirce, 1931-1958), and other disciplines to reconsider literacy activities as socially purposeful and culturally grounded. As literacy research has developed in the last decade, these contextual factors have increasingly moved to the foreground in studies of literacy learning, teaching, and use.

Our work with *RTE*'s external reviewers reveals the degree to which this shift had taken place. When they examine the comparability of groups in quasi-experimental studies, for instance, reviewers inevitably assess the extent to which the design takes the impact of culture into account. Who, they might ask, are the students? What are the teachers' backgrounds? Under what mandates and influences does instruction take place within the domains of community, school, district, academic discipline, etc.?

Similarly, reviewers push authors who employ qualitative data to provide rich contextual detail. For example, if a study draws on interview data, they might ask, Who are the speakers? Why were they selected? What is their rela-

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tionship to the researcher? When and where did the interview take place? In what ways did the interview format and protocol elicit the participant's contributions? How, in other words, were the data constructed through social interaction in a cultural setting?

The field's growing interest in culture is undeniable. However, that interest raises two crucial questions: In the study of particular incidences of literacy teaching and learning, which aspects of culture are particularly germane and should be foregrounded? and What impact does the researcher's own perspective on culture have on the focus and conduct of the study? The articles in this issue suggest something of the range of answers that scholars are providing to these questions.

The issue begins with an article by Anne Haas Dyson that is based on the acceptance speech she gave at a session of the Annual Meeting in Denver honoring her for receiving the 1999 Alan C. Purves Award, an award presented to the author of the *RTE* article from the previous year's volume most likely to affect educational practice. In her award-winning article Dyson focuses on culture at two levels. One level is the idioculture of a small set of students within an urban classroom. By idioculture we mean the local cultures that develop within larger cultural settings (see Cole, 1996; Fine, 1987; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 2000). Her intimate work within this small setting gives Dyson access to the larger cultural worlds that these children find most significant outside school, particularly that of popular culture. Dyson argues that students will understand and produce school texts in relation to media texts whether teachers want them to or not. She contends that it is essential, therefore, for teachers and researchers to consider the impact of media on students' literate lives. In the present article she elaborates on her discussion of the nature of literacy development in media-saturated times. She also introduces another level of culture as she considers the mainstream cultural beliefs, for example, about what is "common" and what is "cultured," that complicate investigations of students like "Coach Bombay's kids," the students she studied in her award-winning article.

Bob Fecho's attention to culture also originates in a single classroom. Unlike Dyson, who visited another teacher's class to learn about the social worlds of children, Fecho studies his own urban high school students and their conceptions of language use as they undertake classroom research projects. Fecho's perspective on his students' learning is decidedly emic: As their teacher he is an insider. Yet as a White teacher of primarily African and Caribbean American public school students, he also resides outside the larger cultural communities to which they belong. Fecho, therefore, deals with culture at different levels and in different ways. On the emic level he is the primary architect of his classroom community, which itself is situated within an alternative learning community he helped to found and design as part of a school reorganization. On the etic level he teaches students who look and speak

quite differently from the way he does. Fecho reports on his efforts to help students interrogate how larger cultural formations affect the ways they use and value language. Like Dyson, then, Fecho looks both within and beyond the classroom to understand the cultural resources that inform his students' investigations, his own inquiry into them, and his own role in teaching in this setting.

Arthur N. Applebee, Robert Burroughs, and Anita S. Stevens examine yet another level of culture in their investigation of the literature curriculum and how it is enacted in a wide variety of classrooms. When they look across classrooms, they find little difference between the classrooms they study and those portrayed in other large-scale examinations of classrooms, suggesting the influence of the culture of school and the discipline of English. However, they also find tremendous variation among classrooms in what they call the domain conventions that govern student activity. The concentric cultures of curriculum and classroom, they argue, can combine to affect student learning in powerful ways. Like Dyson and Fecho, they argue for the need to consider the interplay among various levels of culture. Their focus, however, is broader, sampling the processes taking place within 19 English classes in order to identify the curricular context within which teaching and learning are situated.

Mari Haneda and Gordon Wells also recognize the crucial impact that culture has on students' literate lives, though their focus directs their gaze at yet another aspect of culture. They are interested in students' development of *full literacy*, which they define as the disposition to engage appropriately with texts in the context of purposeful social activity. They argue that this disposition is promoted by the classroom culture, which sets the terms for the purposes that students see literacy practices serving. Like Dyson and Fecho, Haneda and Wells argue for the development of classroom cultures that begin with students' interests and purposes. From these purposes literacy tools such as writing should then serve as vehicles for both generating new learning and representing (if only provisionally) that learning. Haneda and Wells argue that the issue of disposition is critical to students' approach to learning through writing and that teachers can foster the development of this disposition through the kinds of activities and goals that they provide for in their classrooms. They exemplify their ideas by looking at a number of different classrooms, arguing that a similar culture can be created across classrooms and that classrooms can mediate the influence of other cultural forces.

We also see another level of culture that these studies suggest is important, that being the extent to which professional communities foster particular dispositions toward teaching. The teachers reported by Haneda and Wells are members of the *Developing Inquiring Communities In Education Project* (DICEP), a collaborative action research group. The cultural norms of that group support teachers as they design and implement curricula to foster students'

full literacy. Fecho, too, was a member of several overlapping sets of supportive teaching communities. The school-within-a-school that served as the site of his teaching was founded and staffed by teachers who believed in the value of inquiry, thus supporting his exploratory approach to teaching in ways often discouraged in schools. Furthermore, he participated actively in larger teacher-research communities (see, e.g., Fecho, 1993) that validated his emphasis on inquiry. The classroom studied by Dyson also was situated within a network of supportive teachers. Rita, the teacher in whose class Dyson did her work, had participated in the Bay Area Writing Project, a community of teachers in which process-oriented, learner-centered teaching is valued and encouraged.

Although Applebee, Burroughs, and Stevens do not focus on culture of teaching communities, their work on curriculum suggests its importance. Their primary interest is on how a curriculum can foster students' participation in a developing, extended exploration of a set of related, domain-specific ideas. The curriculum, they find, while providing the basic structure for what to teach, is not necessarily designed to encourage ongoing conversations that engage students in disciplinary thinking. The curriculum, then, can only partially serve as the kind of community-building structure that supports the teaching described by Haneda and Wells, Fecho, and Dyson. We think that the articles in this issue suggest that particular instantiations of curricula are a function of the larger traditions and communities with which individual teachers align themselves. We see participation in broader teaching communities as an important factor in supporting instructional approaches that promote the kinds of inquiry and engagement by both teachers and students revealed through these articles.

We make these points to highlight the ways in which different interpretive lenses can feature culture in particular ways and in which teaching cultures support different ways of teaching. Each perspective revealed through these studies provides a way to view how students and teachers experience classrooms and how classrooms can help students and teachers have better experiences. We see these studies as illustrating well how researchers can use various conceptions of culture to frame their investigations of the role of social context in teaching and learning.

Before signing off, we wish to take a moment to thank Kristi Bruce for her year of service as our editorial assistant. The editorial office was in disarray when she began her term and she quickly moved to restore its efficient operation. This work is largely invisible to *RTE* readers but is vital to our editorial work, to the confidence that authors place in the journal, to the relationship we have with NCTE, and to the maintenance of the good faith and communication we try to establish with our many dedicated external reviewers. Kristi's contributions to *RTE* have been countless and we most sincerely appreciate them. We would

like to take this opportunity to thank Kristi publicly for her work on *RTE*'s behalf and wish her well in her new teaching career, and at the same time to welcome Leslie Susan Cook as our new assistant in this vitally important position.

P. S. M.W. S.

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Announcing the Alan C. Purves Award Winner (Volume 33)

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University of Louisville

We are pleased to announce that Anne Haas Dyson of the University of California at Berkeley is the winner of the Alan C. Purves Award for Volume 33 of *Research in the Teaching of English* for her article "Coach Bombay's Kids Learn to Write: Children's Appropriation of Media Material for School Literacy." The award recognizes an article published in *RTE* that is likely to have the greatest impact on classroom practice. A plaque and a lifetime subscription to *RTE* were presented to Prof. Dyson in a special ceremony at the 1999 Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English in Denver, Colorado.

We selected Dyson's article for this award because of its ability to speak to practitioners and researchers alike in original and interesting ways about young children's literacy development in a rich instructional environment. In the study, the author focuses on a tightly knit group of African American first grade friends in an urban elementary school. She examines ways in which the students drew upon such popular culture artifacts as songs, movies, cartoons, and especially sports and sports-related material to inform their writing and reading. Dyson creates memorable portraits of the bright, energetic, verbally-adroit students and the texts they produced. She also vividly depicts their imaginative teacher, who constantly sought ways of enhancing the children's print literacy skills while building upon their existing creative and communicative abilities.

In discussing this classroom Dyson does a masterful job of relating students' and teachers' literacy work and play to theories of school literacy and the development of reading and writing abilities. Characteristically, Dyson is not content simply to confirm or replicate existing theory; rather she pushes, challenges, and extends currently accepted ideas in ways that have serious implications for classrooms around the country. Specifically, she argues that children's developing knowledge of print literacy is dependent on the relevance of that literacy to familiar communicative situations and common themes from students' lives. But at the same time she maintains that students must learn to distinguish among the different social worlds that provide them with agency and important symbols. She also offers readers a powerful depiction of a first grade classroom in which students learned to make such critical distinctions while producing texts that enlighten even as they delight. Though one of the piece's primary strengths is its insightful and well-crafted depiction of particular students in a particular class, we judges all found the issues the author raises about hybrid texts and the ways students appropriate texts from popular culture to be quite provocative. And we believe that Dyson's research will have a salutary effect on classroom practice.

NCTE Announces Scholarships for Future Teachers of English

The NCTE Executive Director's Office invites high school seniors throughout the United States and U.S. territories abroad to apply for the **Executive Director's Challenge,** a one-year scholarship for students who plan careers in teaching elementary or secondary English. Two scholarship recipients will receive $1,000 to support their studies in the first year of college.

Each applicant must submit an essay, no more than 500 words in length, which addresses the following questions: What are the qualities of good teaching that you hope to develop in your own classroom? In what ways do good teachers influence young learners and why do you want to have that influence?

Essays should be typed and double-spaced and should include at the top of the page the applicant's name, home address and telephone number, school name, and school address. **Each application must be accompanied by a letter of recommendation from a current NCTE member.** Deadline for application is **May 15, 2000**. Send applications to Faith Schullstrom, Executive Director, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.