

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION



Is There a Text in This Study?

Twenty years ago, Stanley Fish (1980) asked what has become one of the most famous questions in the recent history of literary criticism: Is there a text in this class? His question resonated for us recently when James Robert Martin, one of our editorial board members, wrote us noting his unease with current literacy research in which, he said, “the text doesn’t really matter” because of the author’s focus on “the context, the social practices in which [the text] is embedded.” Martin, it seems, is asking a corollary question: Is there a text in this study?

As we have noted in previous editorials, in literacy studies researchers have increasingly foregrounded the sociocultural context of teaching and learning. The study of social practices and the cultural histories of which they are a part gains importance as researchers try to account for the differential performance in school of students from diverse homes, communities, and nations. Literacy researchers’ emphasis on the social processes that take place in different settings helps address their concerns about issues of diversity and equity. Researchers taking a cultural perspective have argued that only by understanding how values shape dis-

course and how discourse shapes relationships can educators provide affordances through which students from diverse backgrounds can have access to success in school. The social processes themselves, rather than the texts produced through them, have at times served as the focus of analysis.

Recently, however, some have begun to question the field’s emphasis on context at the expense of text. Martin, whose work has been influential in the teaching of writing, argued in his message to us that if texts are not included in the analysis of discourse, educators will not see ways in which patterns of social interaction are enacted in the reading and production of texts. From Martin’s perspective as a linguist interested in education, without knowledge of such patterns and theories to explain them, educators will have little understanding of how to intervene instructionally with students who produce texts that do not meet conventional expectations. Without knowledge of genre features, these students will lack essential cultural capital that can benefit them in society.

Rabinowitz (1998) makes a similar argument with respect to the reading of

literature. Fish (1980) contends that "interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing" (p. 327), a theoretical orientation that foregrounds readers and the contexts in which they read. The emphasis on readers relegates texts to a minor role, only taking on meaning in light of the ways in which readers are enculturated to view and act upon them. Rabinowitz responds to Fish by arguing that texts themselves are "rule-governed and that, since the rules are conventional, they need somehow to be learned" by readers (p. 49). Without such learning, according to Rabinowitz, readers cannot have meaningful transactions with texts and authors and cannot participate meaningfully in conversations about literature. Like Martin, Rabinowitz argues that texts and their features are artifacts of the cultural practices emphasized by Fish and others and thus merit careful attention.

A point of debate has emerged, then, about the relative importance of text and context in literacy research. Some researchers emphasize the analysis of texts and textual forms while others emphasize the analysis of social practices and pay less attention to the texts embedded in those practices. Many take a position somewhere in between, both analyzing texts and accounting for them through attention to the practices that surround them. The authors of the articles in this issue of *RTE* provide provocative illustrations of the differing emphases researchers place on text and social practice in the study of students' literacy.

In his conceptual review of theory and research on response to literature, Mark Faust argues against what he sees as dualistic conceptions of readers and texts that falsely separate the two. Building on the work of Dewey and Rosenblatt in articulating a transactional theory, Faust challenges the metaphors that he claims inform much teaching and research that emerge from a reader response perspective. Faust argues for the importance of stressing the work through which readers render art—including the kinds of specialized texts known as literature—into an experience. Faust uses his argument on the nature of experience to examine research on response to literature. He argues that understanding experience as Dewey and Rosenblatt describe it requires researchers to attend to the social practices through which literary transactions come about rather than viewing texts as independent entities.

Julie Wollman-Bonilla takes a different stance toward texts in her analysis of Family Message Journals. Family Message Journals are dialogue journals between young children and their parents. Wollman-Bonilla studied the journals in order to understand both students' appropriation of the conventions of scientific writing and their production of hybrid texts that include characteristics of scientific writing and letter writing. Wollman-Bonilla bases her analysis of the students' writing on her understanding of the structural and lexicogrammatical features of scientific writing. Like Martin, she believes that the learning of conventional text struc-

tures provides students with important cultural capital. Wollman-Bonnilla argues that this benefit does not come at the cost of students' self-expression. The students in her study treated the genre conventions of scientific writing as resources rather than restrictions as they melded them with the conventions of letter writing in explaining their scientific knowledge to their parents.

Arlene Clachar focuses her attention on EFL writing instruction in a Turkish university at which the Turkish teachers were asked to use pedagogies imported from the United States. She examines the degree to which the Turkish teachers expressed oppositional and accommodative attitudes toward the teaching methods based on their view of the benefits and costs of reading, writing, and learning in a way that may be at odds with what Turkish students had experienced in their previous schooling. Clachar's analysis emphasizes the ways in which pedagogy is fundamentally political, with cultural values embedded in both the teaching methods used and the stances toward text, topic, and teacher taken by students. She focuses on social practices: the ways that teachers' attitudes toward Western writing pedagogies play out in their interactions with students. Despite this focus her study speaks to the importance of texts in a complex way. The Turkish teachers who resisted Western pedagogies did so in part because of their perception that Turkish students were trained to pay respectful attention to source texts. Their percep-

tion of that respect led to their resistance to another kind of text and the social processes that it embodies: models of Western academic writing.

Eurydice Bauer also focuses on context in her analysis of the code-switching behaviors of her bilingual preschool daughter during shared and independent reading. She documents her daughter's metalingistic awareness through her analysis of how her daughter's construction of tasks influenced her code-switching. Her focus on context is clearly tied to her analysis of the properties of texts. She finds that text is a crucial component of context, that the properties of different kinds of children's books seemed to exert an important influence on her daughter's code-switching behaviors.

The authors in this issue of *RTE*, then, range widely in their relative attention to text and context. On the one hand, Faust stakes out a theoretical position that critiques research that analyzes texts independent of the readers who produce them. On the other hand, Wollman-Bonilla bases her analysis on the study of representative scientific texts and stresses the importance of learning textual conventions in developing disciplinary knowledge. Clachar and Bauer situate themselves somewhere in between. Both see texts as exerting an influence on context, though Bauer explicitly analyzes texts while Clachar does not.

Is there a text in this study? It seems a simple question, but that simplicity is deceiving. We think that the field will continue to grapple with this decep-

tively complex question as it continues its inquiry into the factors that affect literacy, the nature of literacy's artifacts,

and the theoretical frameworks that effectively explain them both.

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References

FISH, S. (1980). *Is there a text in this class?: The authority of interpretive communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

RABINOWITZ, P.J. (1998). What readers do when they read/What authors do when they write. In P.J. Rabinowitz and M.W. Smith, *Authorizing readers: Resistance and respect in the teaching of literature* (pp. 48-72). New York: Teachers College Press.

2000 Grants Funded by NCTE Research Foundation

The NCTE Research Foundation received 43 research proposals requesting funding for the 2000-2001 academic year. Twenty-one of those proposals were funded. Two proposals were selected from the Teacher Researcher category and 19 from the Regular Grants-in-Aid category.

Teacher Researcher Grants: Catherine Compton-Lilly, Laura Schneider VanDerPloeg/ Marcella Fleischman Pixley.

Grants in Aid: Kevin Brooks, Kendra Sisserson, Debra Hicks, Cindy O'Donnell-Allen, Christopher Worthman, Cynthia Selfe/Gail Hawisher, Anne DiPardo/Pat Schnack, Richard Hansberger, Fenice Boyd, Jane Maher, Brian Hout/Peggy O'Neill/Sandra Murphy, George Kamberelis, Joanna Wolfe, Linda Caswell, Andrea Izzo, Rebecca Sipe, Renee Moreno, Mary Maguire/Anne Beer, Maria Franquiz.