

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION



Theory and Method

Even a quick glance at old issues of *Research in the Teaching of English* makes it clear that, while retaining its core values, the journal has changed significantly over its 36 years and 6 editorships. *RTE* was launched in the wake of Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer's *Research in Written Composition* (1963), a review and critique of the corpus of research in writing instruction. The authors take a dim view of the quality of writing research to that point, concluding that most studies had "not . . . been conducted with the knowledge and care that one associates with the physical sciences" (p. 5). They argue that to make writing research more reputable and conclusive, investigations ought to be modeled on research in the hard sciences, with reliability, validity, and replicability being the hallmarks of a convincing and enduring study. They viewed research that did not meet these criteria—which included most writing research to that point—as representing alchemy rather than science, "laced with dreams, prejudices, and makeshift operations" (p. 5).

It's not surprising, then, that as the founding editor of *RTE*, Braddock focused on experimental and quasi-experimental studies of classroom instruction that enacted his view of

scientific research. Given Braddock's intent to instruct the field in the proper conduct of experimental research, these studies were occasionally accompanied by pieces that focused on issues of research design. In the studies themselves, the methods sections described how studies were designed, especially how they controlled variables, and described the kinds of statistical tests that researchers applied to the data. Description alone was enough, for the principles of design that researchers employed and the tools that they used all followed from the same paradigm and so did not require a rationale or detailed explanation. Nor was extensive theory required. As Lloyd-Jones (1999) wrote in retrospect, Braddock

intended merely to encourage teaching practices that were in accord with what people actually knew, but he found that the evidence from research was thin indeed. . . . He recognized that some theory was essential—Aristotle and Dewey were his guides—but he did not really recognize theoretical studies or even historical studies as research. *RTE* was narrowly empirical. (p. 41)

Times have changed. New educational challenges are raising new questions for researchers to pursue. In addition to the "horse race" research question, Which teaching method works best?

researchers are interested in questions that contextualize teaching and learning: Why is this happening here? What processes and relationships are at work both historically and immediately to produce these performances and results? Researchers pose these questions both in and beyond the classroom in order to contribute to the field's understanding of how people (including teachers) make sense of the world through their literate activity. New questions are pushing researchers to read more widely in a greater variety of disciplines to situate their work theoretically. And both the new questions and the theories adopted to frame them are requiring researchers to use research tools drawn from such diverse fields such as anthropology, communication, conversation analysis, critical theory, economics, hermeneutics, information processing, gender studies, linguistics, phenomenology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and others.

In short, researchers are freer now than ever before to pursue a wide variety of research questions approached from diverse theoretical perspectives through the use of many different research tools. But this freedom comes with a cost. Researchers now must explicate issues of theory and method that seemed unnecessary during *RTE's* early years. This elucidation is part of a growing recognition that data are constructed by researchers as a consequence of their theoretical perspective on a problem or topic and their decisions about how to approach it. With this recognition, it seems to us, researchers are obliged to outline a theoretical framework for a study and to explain how that theory

informs the tools the researcher used for the collection, reduction, and analysis of data.

However, during our terms as editors, we've seen the tools of a variety of forms of research reified and presented just as unproblematically as were the analytic tools of the scientific paradigm favored during Braddock's tenure. Some authors offer little explanation for why the research methods were chosen, presenting the choice of method as self-evident rather than as a function of the particular goals and theoretical assumptions of the research. Some authors offer little detail about the methods, presenting them as though the field had a shared understanding of what they are and how they are used; in particular, they say that the data were coded but never reveal the coding system or theoretical rationale behind it. And in some manuscripts the description of the methodological tools is abandoned in the reporting of results as though the nature of the tools used did not mediate what the researchers found.

One of the reasons we found the articles we feature in this issue of *RTE* so compelling is their success in meeting the methodological imperative that their motivating theories suggest. Each article, we think, is exemplary in the ways in which the authors theorize method and make issues of method evident in the analysis.

Cindy O'Donnell-Allen describes her experience as a member of a diverse group of classroom teachers and graduate students who, after some attrition, developed into a discourse community of teacher researchers. She conducted an ethnography of communication, framed

by sociocultural perspectives on language and learning, to identify the overriding motive that gave rise to the activities the group valued and to examine the tools they used, especially the discourse practices, to enact those activities. A sociocultural framework focused her attention on such dimensions as speech genres, goals, and settings that in turn became part of her coding system. Her coding of the data thus enabled her to identify how community members used discourse practices and other communicative tools to mediate their goal-directed actions. These practices were analyzed within the frame of the larger activities of forming a community, learning how to conduct research, transforming themselves professionally, taking an inquiry-oriented approach to their work, and sharing their work with and participating in broader communities of practice. As a consequence of her theory-driven analysis of her data, she is able to argue for a stronger role of teacher research, and teacher research collaborative groups in particular, in providing the agenda and knowledge that drive and inform classroom practice.

Ann Addington studied the patterns of discourse in two discussions of Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* that she participated in as a graduate student. One discussion was set in a seminar in her university's department of English and the other in a book club in a course offered in the college of education. Addington looks at each discussion in its historical context, contrasting the values and practices of university departments of English and colleges of education and their goals for discussing literature. She

analyzed transcripts of each discussion, comparing them in terms of the length and nature of speaker turns, tentative and presentational language, overlapping talk, and questioning. She grounded her coding system in theories of how both individual readers and groups of readers make meaning through reading and social transactions. This analysis enabled her to identify clear variations in the patterns of discourse in the two settings that reveal disciplinary differences in what is valued in literary transactions. From her perspective as a prospective high school English teacher, she identifies tensions between the theoretical orientations and pedagogical practices of the two departments and considers the impact of these tensions on her experience as a student and on her thinking as a teacher. By embodying theories of discourse in a coding system and tracing those theories through discussions in which she participated, she is able to outline differences in discourse that follow from different assumptions about the purpose of reading literature and better theorize her own approach to leading classroom discussions of literature.

In the third article Julie Nelson Christoph and Martin Nystrand present the third report of a methodological triptych examining the character of dialogically organized instruction, using Bakhtin's work on discourse for their theoretical framework. Nystrand and Christoph focus on a ninth-grade class in a low-achieving, largely Hispanic American urban high school, a type of class in which students are customarily exposed to teacher-directed, monologic instruction. This study was designed to comple-

ment previous large-scale analyses of classroom discourse by fleshing out the dynamics of an effective dialogic bid, an attempt by a teacher who described herself as “in transition” to move from the IRE pattern that characterized her classroom to a more authentic give-and-take with her students. To understand the nature of this transition, Nystrand and Christoph used a combination of grounded theory and conversation analysis to analyze transcripts of classroom discourse, with a focus on the dialogic transformations achieved across discussions of literature. This transformation should be evident in a movement from teacher-scripted, text-based instruction characterized by extended teacher turns to greater participation by a broad range of students whose contributions represent the differing values, beliefs, and perspectives that a diverse group of students can provide. In relation to their Bakhtinian theoretical framework, they developed codes for such traits of discussion as the authenticity and cognitive level of questions, amount of uptake, and level of evaluation. This analysis enables them to document why some questions and topics sparked discussion and dialogic interaction while others led to more teacher-centered patterns.

Each of these studies makes clear links between the research and theory upon which it builds and the methods it employs, details the methods in such a way that readers can both understand them and make use of them in their own work, and clearly reveals how the method of analysis gave rise to the results. We think they can serve as models of the methodological clarity and rigor that we’re looking for as editors.

A browse through the Annotated Bibliography of Research in the Teaching of English compiled by Deborah Brown and colleagues, our final feature of this issue, reveals the diversity of theory and method employed by researchers who study the teaching and learning of literacy. This pluralism highlights the need to align theory and method and to explicate each clearly when reporting research. Seeing the wide variety of tools that researchers use provides a reminder that tools are not neutral instruments, that they are designed and selected for reasons, that they have both costs and affordances, and that we must think hard and write well about them when we conduct and report our research.

P.S. M.W.S.

References

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