



Reconsidering Research in the Teaching of English

This is the last issue of *Research in the Teaching of English* that will be published under our editorship. Beginning with the first issue of Volume 38 of *RTE*, Anne DiPardo and Melanie Sperling will take the helm as co-editors. We're delighted to be handing the journal off to such a capable team.

The end of our term provides us the opportunity to look back and consider how the field has evolved during the course of our editorship. In our very first editorial (Smagorinsky & Smith, 1997) we presented our vision of the journal and the field through a discussion of the key terms in the title *Research in the Teaching of English*. We'd like to return to our discussion of these terms—terms that are seemingly innocuous but that are problematic when considered against the backdrop of controversies in the field—as a lens for examining what has happened in the journal and in the field since we began drafting that first editorial in the summer of 1996.

Research: In our initial editorial we noted how the field was in the midst of a reconsideration of what counts as research. In addition to publishing the kinds of APA-style research reports (American Psychological Association, 2001) that most readers have histori-

cally associated with *RTE*, we pledged “to consider teacher-research, historical articles, narratives, and other modes and genres through which researchers are now conducting inquiries” (Smagorinsky & Smith, 1997, p. 158). Along with this expansion of the genres and topics available to researchers reporting their investigations, we invited other kinds of papers previously outside *RTE*'s historical emphasis on publishing original empirical studies. These genres included data-driven conceptual articles, review articles that use prior research to gain new perspectives on important issues, and articles that make theoretical arguments about research methodology.

This decision to invite a broader range of research methods and presentational forms stemmed from our understanding that any single research paradigm is restricted in what it enables an author to formulate. We believed that by limiting the paradigms available to authors and readers, a journal narrows the field's perspectives on how to consider the myriad complexities involved in understanding literacy practices and performances. In a world in which demographics are in continual flux, stakeholders' perspectives are increasingly diverse, and demands made

on educators and schools are increasingly complex and contested, we felt that the field would benefit from the inclusion of as many well-articulated perspectives and voices as possible in considering the process and outcomes of literacy education.

The foment over what counts as research is far from over, but it seems to us that the field is beginning to accept a wider variety of modes and genres. One indication of this trend can be seen in our treatment of two pieces that we published at different points in our editorship. In our second issue we published a philosophical investigation by Lensmire (1997). We noted at the time that Lensmire's piece stretched our conception of research, and we asked him to write a statement clarifying why he regarded his paper as appropriate for *RTE*. Toward the end of our term, we published a paper by White (2003) that invoked Lensmire's publication as its scholarly model. We published White's essay with none of the concern for the field's reception that had caused us much concern six years earlier.

However, despite our invitations, the vast majority of the papers that have been submitted to us have been reports of empirical work reported in APA style. The field's openness to alternative modes of representation has not changed the canonical form of expression. What has changed is that the vast majority of papers submitted during our editorship have employed qualitative methods. The articles in this, our last issue, give a sense of the range of qualitative approaches that we have seen, with

Chandra Power doing textual analysis of historical fiction written for young people; Mollie Blackburn employing a variety of ethnographic approaches in her investigation of The Loft, a community organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth; and Carmen Martínez-Roldán using critical discourse analysis to understand the narratives told by one bilingual elementary school girl during literature circles. If any kind of research has been underrepresented, it has been the quasi-experimental work that was the staple of *RTE* in its early years, a function of a shift in our contributors' paradigmatic preferences rather than of our editorial emphasis.

The trend toward qualitative investigations is strikingly at odds with the federal government's call for what its bureaucrats believe to be *scientifically-based research*. One challenge we see for the field, then, is to demonstrate to policy makers the importance of the kind of qualitative inquiries that now dominate the field. The move to qualitative approaches may be seen as a paradigm shift of the sort Kuhn (1962) describes. As we argued in our May, 1999, editorial (Smith & Smagorinsky, 1999), now it's up to researchers to undertake the business of what Kuhn calls *normal science*. This task entails looking for ways to put individual studies in conversation with each other so that the accretion of knowledge across investigations increases their significance in the eyes of policy-makers.

in: In our initial editorial we argued that research "in" the teaching of English ought to include studies both

within and outside classrooms. We said at that time that we would be happy to consider “investigations of the cultural practices students engage in at home, investigations of literacy practices that take place in disciplines other than English, and investigations of communities of practice that include out-of-school adults” (Smagorinsky & Smith, p. 158). Our term as editors has heightened our appreciation of how much research set outside schools can and should inform what happens inside schools.

Yet late in our editorial term we received a letter from a senior scholar who asked if we ever actually planned to publish any research in the teaching of English. This scholar was no doubt disturbed by our decision to publish a number of papers set outside the confines of the English class: Cushman’s (1999) ethnography on the literacy practices of women negotiating the public welfare system, Beaufort’s (1997) study of workplace literacy, DeStigter’s (1998) narrative of Latino students’ experiences in the *Tesoros* Literacy Project, Johnston’s (1999) data-driven essay on the itinerant nature of ESL teachers’ careers, Bauer’s (2000) study of her bilingual child’s code-switching during home literacy events, O’Donnell-Allen’s (2001) research on a teacher-research group’s discourse processes, Taxel’s (2002) analysis of the political economy of the children’s literature publishing industry, Schultz’s (2002) research on the writing undertaken outside school by students who struggle in classrooms, and others.

This scholar’s disappointment in

our editorial direction suggests continued dissensus in the field regarding the extent to which studies conducted outside English classes can inform instruction within them. The authors of the studies we have published argue that their work has great implications for practicing teachers. In this issue of *RTE*, Mollie Blackburn’s research on the literate and political work undertaken by LGBTQ youth in their community center demonstrates how this change in setting alters the political and relational landscape in which such young people operate. In school they are subject to harassment over their sexual identities, which in turn affects their ability to sustain an academic focus. In The Loft, however, a place where none of the participants is heterosexual, they were authorized to use literacy to challenge inequitable power dynamics. Looking at the youth in this new context allowed Blackburn to see the important work for social justice the youth were able to accomplish through their literacy performances, though she also saw the way those performances sometimes replicated inequitable power relationships within The Loft.

Carmen Martínez-Roldán’s research reveals the ways in which allowing students to tap their home *funds of knowledge* (Moll & Greenberg, 1990) can extend their literacy development in school. In order to assess those funds of knowledge, a researcher must look beyond school. Martínez-Roldán documents the linguistic and generic resources available to one elementary school student. She found that by allowing the student to tap those re-

sources, the teacher enabled her to develop an academic identity as a skillful student who participated effectively in the literature discussions. The student was further able to foster an ethnic and cultural identity rooted in her country of origin and Spanish language. Martínez-Roldán's research illustrates the importance of looking outside school to understand what students can do "in" school and makes a powerful argument against the English-only agenda of the state in which she did her work.

One of Chandra Power's most significant points in her study is that hegemonic narratives tend to limit the possibilities of those on the margins of a culture. We hope that the studies that we have published that have been set outside school provide counter-narratives and so help the field expand its notion of what's possible, especially for those students whose home cultures are at odds with the culture of schools.

the Teaching: As we noted in our initial editorial, the terms "the teaching" "evoke the image of the certified teacher at work in the classroom" and in so doing suggest "a top-down instructional process, an imbalance in the relationship between the actions of teachers and learners" (Smagorinsky & Smith, pp. 158-159). We argued that a reconception "of the idea of teaching would include attention to the diverse people and resources that can serve instructional roles, whether in schools or out, whether adult or child. Such a conception would emphasize the experiences of learners in a teaching relationship" (p. 159).

The articles in this issue suggest the benefits of such a reconception. Power explores how charges of *presentism*—the imposition of a writer's or reader's modern values, beliefs, or awarenesses onto a past era—have been used to dismiss literature that offers counter-hegemonic narratives. In particular, she provides historical evidence to support the credibility of stories in which characters act outside the images typically associated with them. Critics have argued, for instance, that women characters from 1,000 years ago could not have felt feminist sensibilities because the times did not afford them. Power provides substantial evidence that some women indeed held such beliefs, refuting accusations that the characters were developed to forward a feminist agenda and rewrite history through a presentist and ahistorical account of the past. Texts, she argues, are important teachers. It behooves the field, then, to attend carefully to the ways in which texts represent reality and to challenge assumptions about the sensibilities presumed to be available to people from previous eras.

Blackburn notes how the youth at The Loft acted as teachers within and outside their organization, both with one another and with Blackburn herself as participant-observer at the youth center. She presents this teaching role in all its complexity, exploring how the youth challenged, created, perceived, and reified power imbalances in their social and literate relationships. Their performances illustrate a point made by Lewis (1997) in a study we published in our first issue of *RTE*: "when the

teacher gives up power, powerful students will take up the slack” (p. 27). At The Loft the youth governed their own practices and set their own direction, taking on roles as students, teachers, administrators, and whatever else was required. Blackburn’s work has much to offer to classroom teachers who both wish to create authoritative roles for marginalized students and to cede authority to students in classroom communities. She problematizes these relationships by demonstrating what students are capable of accomplishing and by documenting that harmonious relationships will not necessarily follow from student-governed activities.

Martínez-Roldán illustrates how young children can be teachers for each other in their co-construction of narratives. She further shows that this teaching role will be most powerful when a range of the children’s linguistic resources can be brought into play. She particularly draws attention to the ways in which marginalized students—in this case, bilingual speakers of English and Spanish—have much to offer in terms of cultural knowledge during classroom instruction. This knowledge will not be visible to teachers who restrict students’ participation to textbook English, penalizing not only bilingual students in their opportunities to participate but also monolingual students in their opportunities to develop a repertoire of ways to approach texts. There’s an old joke that a person who can speak three languages is called “trilingual,” that a person who can speak two languages is called “bilingual,” and that a person who can only

speak one language is called “American.” Martínez-Roldán’s research points to the limitations of the English-only movement and other restrictive approaches to language usage and culture for all teachers and students in school.

of English: Finally, in our initial editorial we noted that “The terms ‘of English’ are problematic to many for the ways in which they imply an emphasis on secondary and college English classes” (Smagorinsky & Smith, 1997, p. 159). Among the sites excluded from this conception are elementary classrooms with their abundant literacy activities; sites in homes, communities, and workplaces in which literacy plays a key role; and international and multilingual settings.

Yet these sites can greatly inform the work of English teachers and others concerned with school-based literacy performances. This potential has not been lost on the committees charged with identifying the articles published in *RTE* most likely to impact educational practice, honored with an award named for Alan C. Purves, the journal’s second editor. The award winners thus far include DeStigter’s (1998) study of the *Tesoros* Literacy Project, Dyson’s (1999) research on the cultural knowledge young children bring to their writing, Stephen et al.’s (1999) research on a professional development initiative, Wollman-Bonilla’s (2000) study of science writing logs that created a dialogue between young students and their parents, and Fecho’s (2001) inquiry into issues of threat during considerations of volatile social questions. Of these papers, only Fecho’s is set in an

English class, but the kind of instruction he studied is far from traditional. The fact that different committees honored these very diverse studies suggests to us that the field has come to recognize that the teaching of English is more complex than it was in *RTE*'s early years when the goal of research was to identify the most effective methods of teaching English by comparing performances on instructional tasks. Rather, many in the field see the English class and language arts instruction as being among many sites of literacy teaching and learning and therefore as being affected by the processes and practices that take place within and across these other settings.

We've learned so much during our editorial term. Perhaps our greatest lesson has been the richness and diversity of the work being done in the field. The work we have published comes from different disciplinary traditions, makes use of different theoretical frameworks, employs different methodological tools, and involves participants of different ages, ethnicities, social classes, linguistic backgrounds, and school histories. While most have studied people, some (e.g., Power in this issue) have studied texts. What these diverse studies seem to share is the recognition of the power of literacy and a desire to make that power more readily available to more people. We couldn't be prouder to be associated with such an enterprise.

Before we close, we have a number of people to thank. Our deans—Louise Cherry Wilkinson at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey; Joan Smith at the University of Oklahoma; and Russell

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In Stanley Kubrick's film *Full Metal Jacket*, Sergeant Gerheim tells his troops, "Marines die—that's what we're here

for. But the Marine Corps lives forever—and that means *you* live forever." As editors it's our time to move along. We are honored to live on in spirit with a journal so critical to the field to which we've dedicated our life's work. We thank our colleagues for giving us the opportunity to occupy this position and look forward to seeing *RTE*, and the field it serves, continue to evolve as it meets the challenges ahead.

M.W.S. P.S.

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