THE ROLE OF THE ENGLISH EDUCATION SPECIALIST IN SUPERVISING AND CONDUCTING RESEARCH

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What is the role of the English education specialist in supervising research? The question implies that a major responsibility of the English education specialist who teaches in a graduate school is to direct doctoral research related to the teaching of English. In order to do so, he must understand the functions and limitations of research, particularly of the kind that can be conducted by the unsubsidized graduate student. If research is not to be limited by shortness of time and money and lack of personnel, the English education specialist may need to extend his role to seeking financial support for research ideas that may also generate doctoral studies.

The English education specialist should know what questions need to be asked about English—how language skills and appreciation of literature may be learned, how they may be taught, and how the curriculum may be organized. This implies a knowledge of what research has been done in the field and an ability to read research. The English education specialist should know what we most want to know in order to improve our understanding of English and the teaching of English, and he should also know what research methods can be applied to find valid answers. His knowledge of research methods probably cannot be as technical as that of the expert in statistics and research design, but he must understand these at least well enough to seek help from statisticians and psychologists. If he cannot use the researcher’s tools directly himself, he must know their force so that he will not be dazzled by statistics and thus fail to detect unanswered questions which the outward display of accuracy can often conceal.

The English education specialist must have a philosophy of research. Perhaps the word itself has become too overworked ever to regain a common, precise definition. Most of us would recognize degrees of elasticity in the definitions of doctoral research and some latitude in the types of research we would accept or reject at this level. Perhaps this is largely a personal matter, or an institutional one; at any rate it seems unlikely that the quality of doctoral research can be legislated. The responsibility of the English education specialist to his profession is to maintain standards he respects; his responsibility to his students is to make these standards known. Certainly it is the prerogative of the individual professor to reject, for example, historical surveys or studies of current practices. But for the individual or institution that maintains rigid definitions of research, it would seem to be a correlative responsibility to recognize the values of other kinds of thinking, the "powers of the left hand," in Jerome Bruner’s phrase.

*In preparing this initial discussion of a few of the ideas implicit in the topic assigned to the group on research, I have drawn from preliminary correspondence with the consultants: John S. Simmons, co-chairman; Oscar Haugh, John Brownell, and Lou LaBrant. Although Dr. LaBrant was unable to attend the conference, she contributed many of the ideas contained in this paper.

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In supervising doctoral research, then, the English education specialist must be able to define his particular standards of research, must know the existing research and the needed, and must understand the tests to which researchable questions can be put. To serve well this phase of his total role, he needs an analytical mind and sound judgment, but more than this he needs the tolerance to accept, and the enthusiasm to respond to, the ideas of his students.

**Purposes of Doctoral Research**

What are the purposes of original research in the preparation of English education specialists? Some of the reasons for doing one good piece of research as a doctoral dissertation have been suggested in the foregoing; obviously the English education specialist needs this experience himself in order to guide others. But even if the doctoral candidate is not to become a teacher in a graduate school, the dissertation has values. One of these is to teach that the first step is to find out what is already known. It is easy for the would-be researcher to raise questions about teaching English. He soon learns that others have asked the same questions, and that perhaps a few have even found answers. The search which precedes defining a doctoral study gives the student the historical perspective that sometimes seems lacking when questions such as the relationship between knowledge of grammar and ability in written composition keep recurring in educational circles.

Another reason for doctoral research is to teach the student how to raise researchable questions and how to cut these to the limitations imposed by time, funds, and energy. As a result, the student learns how narrow the focus of doctoral research generally is and how limited the findings of shoestring studies must be. The object is not to humble the student (although this sometimes seems to be the unfortunate effect of the doctoral process), but to enlarge his vision of the demands upon educational research and to increase his care as a consumer of research findings.

Still another purpose of the doctoral study is to teach the investigator to distinguish between findings and conclusions. An astute advisor leads the candidate to measure accurately the distance between what is found and what is inferred. From reading his own data, as well as from studying the research experiences of others, the successful student learns to avoid familiar pitfalls: the Hawthorne effect, the failure to distinguish between correlations and causal relationships, the temptation to go beyond one’s data.1 If he is fortunate and wise, he learns that the true significance of his study may be what he learned of research method in doing it, and not the findings themselves.

From exercising caution in interpreting his findings, he learns to ask exacting questions about the conclusions reached by other researchers. For example, if the findings of a study of the use of lay readers, or machines, or special methods of instruction show that students “did better or no better,” he learns to ask: “No better than what? Better in what way?” If experimental methods result in improvements in reading, he asks: “How improved?

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Did the subjects merely make better scores on a test, or did they begin to read more books? Or did they show marked improvement in courses that require reading?"

The "So What?" Test

Early in the game, the doctoral candidate and his advisor must face the "so what?" question. This is not wholly answered by the benefits that accrue to the investigator in carrying out the study. Even though the research of a single investigator is necessarily limited, the study should be derived from carefully conceived theory. Otherwise, in the words of Edgar Dale, the study may prove only that we can do better what should not have been done at all. Many questions are not truly researchable, even though a design can be found to test them, because they arise from unsound premises. The role of research is to verify assumptions that are worth verifying.

The "so what?" test helps to define what our questions really ask. For instance, to ask teachers their opinions of anthologies may tell us something about the teachers but very little about anthologies. A content analysis made by a competent, open-minded critic would be a better source of information about what anthologies are, but it would tell nothing about what they do. The essential question may not refer to anthologies at all, since our interest as educators is not so much in how literature is packaged but in the effects of literature upon readers.

So important to the aims of teaching are "effects of literature" that the host of questions contained therein would undoubtedly satisfy the most rigorous applications of "so what?" But which of these are researchable? Some questions belong to speculation and theory, to introspection and intuition. Research design could probably handle only a small corner of the total fabric of ideas implied in "effects of literature." A researchable question might emerge if we could define and delimit "literature" and "effects" and "readers"—for example: how do adolescent boys of certain characteristics respond to selections of humorous verse under certain circumstances?

In the process of snipping off a manageable corner of an important idea, the investigator sometimes loses sight of the total fabric. So does his audience. Snippets of research depreciate rapidly when viewed out of context.

So the synthesis of sound research findings is a major responsibility of the English education specialist, one that he passes along to his doctoral candidate through the writing of the dissertation and the resulting publications. For unless the subject is so esoteric or the findings so limited as to defy interpretation, the investigator has an obligation to publish. In publishing the results of a new piece of research, the writer should clearly show its relationship to other studies. In addition to this type of synthesis, we need critical reviews and syntheses of research that serve to keep alive studies of value and to kill off those that have lost their usefulness. These periodic syntheses are useful contributions of the English education specialist to the improvement of his profession.

Learning to report research accurately is a major purpose of the doctoral program. The obligation to publish carries with it a responsibility to state
clearly and simply the results of the study. Moreover, the report should show how the results were obtained, giving full and accurate descriptions of the instruments of the study. In many instances the words to describe elaborate statistical treatment might be better spent on testifying to the quality of the data and the procedures for collecting it. While different audiences demand different levels of specificity in reporting research studies, the best report is probably the one that speaks simply and clearly to teachers of English and to nonspecialists, rather than to special coteries of psychologists, linguists, or statisticians.

For many English education specialists, opportunities to engage directly in postdoctoral research will be restricted by various demands upon their time and energy and interests: teaching, consulting, writing, administering programs, preparing instructional materials, serving local and national committees, guiding masters and doctoral candidates, etc. The English education specialist may choose not to conduct original research studies himself, but he cannot reject his obligations as a consumer and interpreter of research. His knowledge of research must inform all his other activities, becoming an integral part of his methods courses and his work with preservice and inservice teachers. Knowledge of research—what it tells and what it conceals—is essential to his theories of curriculum, teaching, and instructional materials.

With complete respect for research and its limitations, the English education specialist is too sophisticated to become a cultist. He knows better than to ask more of educational research than it can give in its present underdeveloped state. Similarly, he knows better than to turn his back on data carefully collected and recorded over the years, and still viable.