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Editors’ Introduction

Writing Research outside the U.S.: Our Final Introduction

Mark Dressman
Sarah McCarthey
Paul Prior

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

This issue is our final one, capping our five-year term as editors. In our first introduction (“On Research in the Teaching of English”), we identified globalization as one of the key themes in the field that we hoped to see explored more in the journal. Thus, it is fitting that we end with a special themed issue, the third of our editorship, on Research on Writing Practices outside of the U.S. Our call for submissions described the primary goal for this issue as exploring studies of writing practices conducted outside of the United States, particularly by international scholars in writing and literacy studies, that investigate the literate lives and writing practices of children, youth, and adults in diverse contexts. We noted that international research in the areas of writing studies and digital literacy has expanded strikingly over the past two decades. That expansion has recently been marked, for example, by the emergence of the Writing Research Across Borders (WRAB) conferences, which in turn spurred the formation of the International Society for the Advancement of Writing Research, whose next conference will take place in Paris in 2014. It has also been marked by scholarship that aims to create greater dialogue across national and language borders (see e.g., Bazerman, Bonini, & Figueiredo, 2009; Castelló & Donahue, 2012). In this context, we identified another goal of the special issue as facilitating international communication of cutting-edge writing research. In response to our call, we received 33 fascinating abstracts from scholars doing innovative work across the globe. We invited the authors of eight abstracts to submit full manuscripts for the usual processes of peer review and revision and now, at the end of the process, we are happy to be featuring four articles that attest to the breadth, variety, and relevance of international research on writing.

In “What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up? Self-Construction in Indonesian Street Children’s Writing,” Sophie Dewayani takes the reader both literally and figuratively to the intersection of schooling and the street in Bandung, Indonesia, where children are engaging in a writing workshop organized by a non-governmental organization. Within the shared space of street sellers, parents, and pedestrians, tutors asked the children to produce cita-cita, writing about their
future career choices, and they used a flowerpot or their laps to construct narratives about becoming policemen or doctors. As trucks and motorcycles fly by, children engage in an academic writing task until the light turns red, signaling opportunities to dust the stopped cars. The scene is in sharp contrast to the formal schooling many of the children had left behind, feeling that school would not lead to social mobility. Dewayani’s slice of a longer ethnographic study captures a unique literacy event that is shaped by the government’s efforts to ban children from being on the street even as it fails in implementing the Education for All policy. Like the parents who supervised them to ensure they did not do anything illegal, the children challenge government narratives that suggest they cannot break the cycle of poverty, projecting themselves as successful adults in their writing.

While children incorporated academic tasks in the liminal space of a median in the streets of a heavily populated city in Indonesia, girls in a rural secondary boarding school in Kenya faced other challenges, including very limited resources (no library, one science lab, shortages of books, difficult living conditions), but found in an afterschool journalism club organized by their English teacher (who co-authors this article) a place where they could rehearse, appropriate, and perform the roles of journalists. In “Integrated Literacies in the Liminal Space of a Rural Kenyan Girls’ Secondary School Journalism Club,” Maureen Kendrick, Margaret Early, and Walter Chemjor analyze the way that the introduction of new digital tools (digital recorders and cameras) available through the club afforded students opportunities for learning, but also the way that the liminal spaces of the club made an impact on “girls’ shifting identities and growing competences, as activists and journalistic writers (p. 415).” Their study makes a powerful argument for the role of spaces other than classrooms to promote “new degrees of freedom, community, equality and creativity” for students to become competent writers (p. 415).

Brandon Tullock and Marta Fernández-Villanueva explore the intersections of cognition and writing in the context of a highly multilingual German immersion secondary school in Spain. In “The Role of Previously Learned Languages in the Thought Processes of Multilingual Writers at the Deutsche Schule Barcelona,” they trace this multilingual context in the word searches students do during a think-aloud writing protocol. The students in the school were multilingual, speaking at least one of the community languages (Spanish and Catalan) and German fluently, but all students had also studied Catalan, French, and English in the school. The authors identify English as the students’ L4, their fourth language. Doing a think-aloud for an English writing task, the 10 students participating in this study often spoke about their searches for particular English vocabulary. What the researchers traced, in part, were the languages the students employed in those searches. All students spoke aloud in at least two languages, most in at least three, and one in five. By detailing the ways that students blended languages in their think-aloud protocols, the article analyzes cross-linguistic behavior to explore the nature of
multicompetence in writing. In the U.S. context, where English-Only movements continue to thrive, these images of everyday multilingual performance are particularly striking. Theoretically, they highlight how monolingual assumptions have often been tacitly inscribed in English-language writing research, theory, and practice.

The final article in this issue is also set in Spain, but here in the advanced stages of doctoral study in the university. In “Learning to Write a Research Article: Ph.D. Students’ Transitions toward Disciplinary Writing Regulation,” Montserrat Castelló, Anna Iñesta, and Mariona Corcelles explore the challenges Ph.D. students face as they move from school writing to disciplinary writing. Closely following a focal group of psychology students involved in an innovative doctoral seminar that aimed to support their transition to publication in the field, Castelló, Iñesta, and Corcelles draw on activity theory to highlight specific contradictions that the students faced and needed to negotiate, contradictions centering on conceptualization of texts and on identity. They argue for the value of a unit of analysis they call the regulation episode, “the sequences of discourse and/or action from which a contradiction can be inferred and which, in turn, lead to the implementation of innovative actions (traceable in students’ discourse and texts) aimed to solve it.” Their careful, well-theorized research offers a model other researchers can use to explore the complexities of literate activity in varied settings, and it points, we believe, to the kind of value we may gain from greater international dialogue on writing research and theory.

As we reflect back on the five-plus years we have been editors of Research in the Teaching of English, we have to note and thank the many people who have made this task not only possible, but also productive and rewarding, without whose many and varied efforts an enterprise like this journal would not be possible. First, we are profoundly grateful to those who have served on our Editorial Board, often taking on significant reviewing duties for the journal, and to the literally hundreds of people, from established scholars to advanced graduate students, who have answered the call to review articles. We have repeatedly been impressed by the effort, intelligence, and wisdom displayed in those reviews. We would particularly like to thank Peter Smagorinsky, who as a member of the Board and a former editor of RTE offered invaluable counsel and took on much more than his share of reviewing assignments. We also appreciate the wonderful work of guest editors Valerie Kinloch, Arnetha Ball, and María Fránquiz on our first themed issue (November 2010, Research on Literacy in Diverse Educational Contexts). Likewise, we and the field have benefitted enormously from the generous and brilliant work of Richard Beach and his colleagues in providing the annual bibliographies of research in the teaching of English. Without this collective economy of our intellectual communities, a research journal like RTE would simply not be possible and the research literature would not be as clear, accurate, relevant, or meaningful. Second, we are
grateful to the many authors whose manuscripts have kept us so busy over the years, especially, of course, to the authors who have worked through the rigorous, often challenging, processes of peer review and revision that led to publication in *RTE*. We are proud to have played some small part in the addition of these fine research articles and insightful essays to the literatures of our fields. Third, we must thank those who have worked behind the scenes to make the journal successful. We have been blessed by outstanding editorial assistants. Wayne Journell in our first year and Ritu Radhakrishnan for the next four skillfully and tactfully managed the constant flow of manuscripts and correspondence of the journal, keeping us all focused on getting to the next issue. Jessica Bannon for over four years and Andrea Olinger in our final year insightfully and carefully engaged in copyediting the manuscripts and in shepherding texts from acceptance to publication. We have also been blessed with the constant and consummate professional excellence of Rona Smith as the Production Editor at NCTE and with the sage advice of Kurt Austin. Fourth, closer to home we have to acknowledge the inestimable support of our families. Paul has depended much on the support of, and rich discussions with, his wife and colleague, Julie Hengst, and their two children, Nora and Anna. Mark and Sarah want to acknowledge our son, Mac, who has listened patiently to our discussions about topics from globalization to what constitutes effective literacy pedagogy in conversations around the dinner table—he might (because or in spite of us) become an English teacher or literacy researcher. Finally, we have to say what a pleasure it has been work on the transition with the incoming editors, Mary Juzwik and Ellen Cushman; we look forward to continuing as readers of *RTE* during what we are sure will be the exciting and informative years of their editorship.

REFERENCES
