English Research from 1984 to 2015: A Then, Newer, and Now Look through the Eyes of Our RTE Editorship

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The late 1970s and early 1980s were a wonderful time in the field of English literacy research. The wealth of conceptual possibilities brought on by the cognitive and computer science revolutions, as well as the civil rights movement, and the knowledge and research methodologies gained from related work in linguistics, anthropology, psycholinguistics, psychology, and sociology, offered promising new ways to study issues of language, thought, teaching, and learning in situated contexts. Together with new research in our own field, they held much promise for substantive theoretical and pragmatic reform.

With delight at the chance to be at the center of change in our field, we assumed the editorship of RTE in February 1984, leaving in December 1991. These eight years were intellectually exciting and proved to be a period of scholarly growth for us personally as well as for the field. We were the fourth editors of RTE, preceded by Richard Braddock, Alan Purves, and Roy O’Donnell. During their editorship, RTE had grown from a twice-a-year journal to a quarterly, with increasing focus on high-level research and the emergence of a loyal and steady readership. During our term, circulation continued to climb and the journal’s Social Science Citation Index rating increased from 17th to 6th place.

We wanted to build upon our predecessors’ base by extending the scope of issues and methodologies in ways that would reflect the changing nature of the field. It was our goal to increase interdisciplinary dialogue, and through it to broaden the topical, conceptual, and methodological base to include the research of, and attract the readership of, the broad array of professionals who were concerned with the intersections among language, learning, and contexts. We saw (and still see) the field of English as an interdisciplinary amalgam, calling on work in anthropology, sociology, psychology, and linguistics as well as literary scholarship—with smaller ties to other fields as well.

We envisioned RTE as a mutual forum for sharing work and stimulating growth through increased scholarly interaction and growing familiarity across
disciplines. We wanted it to become a gathering site for our colleagues to think, talk, write, and explore the issues of the day—to raise questions, open possibilities, and reshape our future. Given the social media of today, this undertaking seems easier than it was for us 31 years ago; however, our networking goals were similar. We hoped the journal’s articles would influence both the informal discussions and the formal presentations at local and national conferences, as well as in graduate coursework, inservice workshops, and department and district-wide meetings. We wanted our colleagues to be engaged in the process of professional commitment to do and use research as a tool for exchange, growth, reflection, and action. In short, we wanted to “stir the pot.”

Where did we start on this audacious plan? To begin with, we invited an array of interdisciplinary colleagues to sit on the editorial board. They were: James Britton, Roger Brown, Bertram Bruce, Robert Calfee, Charles Cooper, Jerome Harste, John R. Hayes, Shirley Brice Heath, Walter Kintsch, Robin Lakoff, David Olson, Alan Purves, Gordon Wells, and Merlin Wittrock. Also, we changed the more traditional editor’s introductory pages about the contents and scope of the articles in each issue to an ongoing section titled “Musings.” Aside from the first and last issues, which were written by us both, we took alternating turns writing the column, always using what we were learning from the many manuscripts we read; the diverse scholars who reviewed them; the inquiries, concerns, and complaints we received; and the zeitgeist of the day to identify the conflicts and inconsistencies we wanted to share—as ideas we hoped would be examined in the professional arena.

We used our first Musings (Langer & Applebee, 1984) as a “Cook’s Tour” of several critical issues we felt had already emerged, and our last (Langer & Applebee, 1991) as a comment on how those issues had fared eight years later. Each of the Musings in between focused on a specific timely topic, chosen by whichever of us was the author. First, let’s look at our big concerns in early 1984, late 1991, and now—some 31 years later—which include methodological narrowness, separation of process and product, inadequate conceptualization of teacher-as-researcher, the need for instructional research, and limited notions of instruction and development. Then we will comment on the field as it seems now and end with some concerns we feel need to be addressed.

As We Saw It in 1984

Methodological Narrowness

At the time, research methodology in education was unidimensional, almost warlike. In the stronger hand was the continuation of traditional experimental and quasi-experimental paradigms, and in the other were more recent methodologies and applications of linguistics, sociolinguistics, and anthropology. It seemed the two camps were working to limit rather than broaden methodological approaches in our field, with one side disparaging the rigor or usefulness of the other. To compound the problem, some researchers tried to blend aspects of the various research traditions without (we felt) understanding their philosophical and/or methodological underpinnings. The first side, we felt, threatened to limit the
number of different perspectives we could obtain on the complex phenomena we wished to study, while the second threatened to undermine the conceptual base that gives each methodology its particular strength and power. We called for expanding theoretical bases and methodologies, while maintaining relevant conceptual, design, and analytic rigor.

**Separation of Process and Product**
From the mid-1970s on, much research in education shifted from studies of final performance to close analyses of the learning process itself. Although this shift was necessary to correct imbalances, we felt that a focus on process alone was as limited as a focus on product, and called for recognition that processes are driven by purposes related to the goal or final product. How the processes develop in interaction with their purposes is critical. We cautioned that studies of process that did not relate it to the product that emerged might limit our understanding of both.

**Inadequate Conceptualization of Teacher-as-Researcher**
An important movement at the time focused on the validity and importance of teachers’ knowledge about learning as well as teaching, and on the collegial role teachers can play in the research experience. We felt strongly that teachers have an important role to play as collaborators, not simply as subjects. Our concern was that early studies too often trivialized the important roles involved in the collaboration. We felt that teachers and researchers come to the research experience with different academic expertise and bring different work expertise to the problems being studied. From our perspective, the most productive collaborations are likely to build on those different strengths rather than to explain them away. However, this was seldom the case in the research designs we encountered.

**The Need for Instructional Research**
We also were concerned with what we considered an imbalance between basic and applied research in our field. It grew, we felt, from an old debate in education around a call for more instructional research. Did we, as a field, know enough underlying theory to focus primarily on “application”? Although we had no problem with the calls for studies of the classroom, we thought that focusing on application, and sacrificing strong theoretical frameworks that would allow for broader understandings, was the wrong way to go. We felt studies of instruction were very much needed; however, they needed to be based on rigorous and careful conceptualizations of larger issues in learning as they related to the specific kinds of student groups, subject areas, and instruction being studied. The theoretical frames, we felt, needed to be strong enough that the particular configurations or techniques in a study could be related to the experienced teachers’ repertoire in ways that could be internalized. We were looking for studies that helped teachers revive, refine, and/or arrive at deeper and more pedagogically grounded understandings of teaching and learning that would enable them to make efficacious decisions on their own. We hoped improved research designs would ensure against the development of superficial recipes that would soon be misplaced.
Limited Notions of Instruction and Development
At the time, we were concerned that a number of studies had adopted a “pseudo-developmental” model; they began with studies of adult performance on a task and then examined how younger, less experienced, or more poorly performing learners used the expert stages in approaching the task. Too often this contrast was followed with an instructional program designed to teach the missing skill, strategy, or knowledge. It seemed to us that these studies were too similar to the early language studies comparing adult and child language patterns. We felt we needed to learn from the subsequent unhelpful instructional “deficit” models of child language that were later shown to underestimate the systematic patterns of development in children that differed from those of adults yet led to the more mature forms. We warned that instruction based on expert/novice differences would likely be equally ineffective.

We’re sure you, as readers, have already begun making your own then-and-now comparisons between 1984 and today, and we will do this too. But first, we’re going to insert an intermediate step. As you can imagine, Musings that we wrote 24 to 31 years ago had become a more-than-faded memory for us when we were asked to write this article. So just think how delighted we were, upon rereading them all, to find that in our very last issue (December 1991) we revisited these five concerns and commented on where we were eight years later. Here is the recap: We reported that research in our field had in fact witnessed many changes across the eight years. Further, we felt that in each of the five areas, the field had come a long way. Let us look at this shift more closely.

As We Saw It in 1991
Methodological Narrowness
We said that research methodology within the field had broadened considerably, and the war between qualitative and quantitative methodologies had calmed but not ended. Qualitative research, we claimed, had become an accepted part of our research tradition and had appeared regularly in RTE during our editorship. In our last musing we stated, “The obligatory defense of the researcher’s decision not to ‘count’ had also disappeared from most other journals, and even from many dissertations” (Langer & Applebee, 1991). Further, the field had begun to develop its own tradition of classroom research paradigms calling on aspects of anthropological, sociological, and linguistic research in principled ways that address our own issues. In this same musing, we further commented that researchers had begun to experiment with “interesting combinations of methods, sometimes drawing on different disciplinary traditions” (Langer & Applebee, 1991) and with both qualitative and quantitative methods within the same study.

We felt that these shifts had enriched the field. For example, in “Writing in Academic Settings,” Anne Herrington (1985) reported a study of two chemical engineering classes. Using both qualitative and quantitative methodology, she relied on a survey of students and professors, open-ended discourse-based interviews,
and analysis of claims and warrants used in students' written reports. Findings suggested that each class was a “distinct disciplinary community where different issues were addressed, different lines of reasoning used and different writers and audience roles assumed” (Herrington, 1985). The works of Dell Hymes, an anthropologist/sociolinguist, and Michael Halliday, a linguist, contributed to the theoretical framework, analyses, and interpretations.

Separation of Process and Product
Here we reported that the problems we'd stated eight years before had begun to be addressed. Instead of a focus on product, concepts such as purpose, function, and activity had become more commonplace, and studies of learning and instruction had begun to focus on interrelationships of the “how, what and how-comes of learning” (Langer & Applebee, 1991). Take the article “Reading, Writing and Knowing: The Role of Disciplinary Knowledge in Comprehension and Composing” by John Ackerman (1991) as an example. It explored how writers with extensive experience in an academic discipline use both topical and rhetorical knowledge to construct synthesis essays. Think-aloud protocols and essays were analyzed for the importance and quality of information; both process and product were at the center of this work.

Inadequate Conceptualizations of Teacher-as-Researcher
We noted that, beyond the role of teacher as subject, two differing and complementary paradigms had emerged for strengthening the role of teachers in the research enterprise. One involved a collaboration in which each participant made specialized contributions based upon the particular kinds of knowledge they brought. The second involved the reflective teacher in classroom research, focusing on the teacher’s own classroom or that of a collaborating colleague. We stated that each type of teacher-as-researcher paradigm had involved increasing numbers of teachers, leading to deepened professional roles in which teachers’ perspectives had become an integral part of the process of educational change and improvement. During this period, the studies of classroom instruction were often status studies, examining what the teacher was doing. An example is Joyce Kreeft Peyton and Mulugetta Seyoum's (1989) study conducted at the Center for Applied Linguistics, “The Effect of Teacher Strategies on Students’ Interactive Writing: The Case of Dialogue Journals.” In the study, the researchers examined and described the teacher’s interactions with a class of English learners, the nature of the interactions, and, particularly, the kinds of support the teacher gave in building upon student-selected topics. Although the teacher was an object of study, it was the study of an active teacher’s attempts to help students grow as writers. We suggested that the thorough analysis and examples offered extremely useful material for follow-up studies with teachers and researchers to take the next step—working more collaboratively. Studies of actual collaborations were sent to us for review, but generally had not been sufficiently well designed to make it into print. For RTE, it was the cusp of the next era.
The Need for Instructional Research
Eight years prior, we had cautioned that calls for quick fixes might lead to trivial applications of what the field had been learning or had learned. We’d argued instead for studies that would develop theories of instruction. Our final “report card” stated that “although theoretically well-grounded studies of instruction are still too rare, their numbers have increased in the past few years, often in contexts where the investigators also look at the relationships among process and product” (Langer & Applebee, 1991). In her report “A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing Across the Curriculum,” Louise Parkinson McCarthy (1987) described a study looking at students’ speech and writing experiences in the various classes they took, calling them each a “new territory.” She explained how students tried to “figure out what the writing requirements were in that particular discipline and for that teacher, and how they went about producing it” (McCarthy, 1987). Findings explain the ways students figured out what to do as well as factors that enhanced or inhibited success. We consider this a very necessary early study of instruction offering important insights and evidence that were needed to inform future intervention studies. We go on to suggest that such studies were leading the field to develop theories of instruction that would support a learner-centered focus.

Limited Notions of Development and Instruction
How did the expert/novice paradigm fare after eight years? We reported that “as researchers have begun to look more systematically at instructional issues, the relatively simplistic solutions offered by expert/novice constructs seem to have faded away.”

As We See It in 2015
Now we will join you in revisiting these issues from the vector of 2015. As you know, the field of education has always been responsive to the societal times in which it exists. We began this article with a reminder of the effects of the cognitive and computer science revolutions, as well as the civil rights movement and related research in the social sciences and their effect on conceptualizations of research on teaching and learning. The goals of teaching and learning, who the learners are, and the societal values and practices make all the difference. It was true in the days of the New England Primer, through the McGuffy Readers with their focus on moral and ethical traditions. It was true during and after World War I, when the focus was on development of patriotism and civic virtues. It was true during the 1960s and beyond, with a growing focus on representation, diversity, voice, and inclusion. All were and are reflected in what is read, how it is taught, and how it is learned—by whom and under what conditions.

With the 1990s came a growing focus on globalization, the twenty-first-century workplace, and the need to compete effectively on the world stage, not only economically, but in terms of student performance. This interest grew from the concern that American students were not sufficiently learning the literacy skills (and other knowledge) to be competitive in the growing world market, and in re-
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Response led to the development of state and eventually national standards as a way to upgrade curriculum as well as teaching and learning of the major subjects. By 2001, we saw the passage of the education bill No Child Left Behind. This legislation called for annual tests in reading and mathematics in grades 3–8 as well as less frequent science assessments. A year later, in 2002, Grover Whitehurst began his six-year appointment as director of the Institute of Education Sciences. His focus on educational research was strong, requiring all government-funded research to adhere to experimental paradigms. Although he is no longer in this role and mixed-method designs and more varied paradigms and research programs (rigorously conceptualized and designed) are quite acceptable in government-funded research, this era was a big setback from the research changes called for in our first Musings.

In rereading our Musings and many of the articles our colleagues wrote, we found ourselves remembering the issues and concerns of the 1980s. In addition to the social aspects just discussed, we found ourselves in a lucky era that invited us into intellectually charged new territory. The cognitive science and computer science movements in the 1980s were interdisciplinary. They were about language and thought and process. In our field, a large number of studies focused on process and context as much as content. We were finding ways to better understand the underlying nature of writing and reading and thinking and the many factors that affect them. Therefore, the studies submitted to RTE were predominantly status studies, focusing on text, content, interactions, purposes, context, or any of the many other possible variables that could help us better understand how reading, writing, teaching, and classroom interactions take shape and what leads them to one set of understandings rather than another. With this hindsight, we realize that the nature of the research designs in a field necessarily changes over time, not only as society changes, but also as the particular issues addressed in the field change. It was necessary, we think, to have taken our time on closely studying in situ the phenomena that were at the center of our concerns. It gave us the rich foundation we bring to the kinds of studies we are undertaking today.

Where are we now in regard to the big five areas?

Methodological Narrowness
From the early 2000s until recently, research in our field underwent a methodological narrowing that, from our perspective, marginalized important knowledge and methodologies the field had gained about teaching and learning from and with the fields of anthropology and linguistics. More recently, this scope has begun to expand, with a greater number of interdisciplinary collaborations and mixed-methods studies appearing in publication. Such studies are common. However, we still miss the range of conceptually and design-driven interdisciplinary studies that appeared in the 1980s, looking at schools, students, teachers, and learning from a number of vantage points.

Separation of Process and Product
This is a difficult one to call. Research paradigms more frequently consider both process and product, while large-scale assessments do not. For some years, although
there was a good deal of research on the teaching and learning of strategies and in-
process instructional assistance, large-scale assessments tended to turn away from
more thoughtful and longer-timed tasks and toward multiple-choice formats (the
National Assessment of Educational Progress, for example). The national focus
on product may have narrowed the options researchers felt they had in address-
ing issues of wide-scale concern. Both the PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of
Readiness for College and Careers) and Smarter Balanced assessments relate to
the Common Core State Standards’ claim to be process-oriented, but reports of
problems make their outcomes impossible to judge at this time. We will have to
argue, as we did in 1984, that what we need is a focus on both—tracking the pro-
cess and the product it leads to—that takes into account a wide range of human,
content, and contextual variables for a wide range of purposes.

Inadequate Conceptualization of Teacher-as-Researcher
From our informal professional interactions and networks, it appears to us that
more teachers have taken on professional roles where they stay deeply tuned to the
research; closely develop and hone pedagogical frameworks and related strategies;
try out, test, and refine these methods with their array of students; share their ideas
with other teachers for further refinement; present at conferences and workshops;
and write books about their pedagogy, all while they develop and maintain strong
collaborative ties with researchers.

Also, there are more large-scale, well-funded research projects (as well as
smaller ones) that have created strong roles for teacher-researchers as contributing
research team members whose special knowledge is a critical aspect of the design.
For example, Susan Goldman (2010) is principal investigator of Project READI
(Reading, Evidence, and Argumentation in Disciplinary Instruction), which is
funded by the Institute of Education Sciences. It is a multidisciplinary and multi-
institution collaboration aimed at research and development to improve complex
comprehension of multiple forms of text in literature, history, and science. The
research design itself has created a community of practice that involves ongoing
collaborations among researchers and teachers from the various disciplines. Col-
laborative design teams of teachers and researchers engage in iterative cycles of
design-based research. The designs focus on evidence-based argument from mul-
tiple sources, implemented by design team teachers and documented by researchers.
Together they develop the lessons—discussing what, how, what happened, and
why—and suggest iterative revisions. They are a true collaborative team.

The Need for Instructional Research
Funding of large-scale studies by the Institute of Educational Sciences supports
researchers at various stages in their work. Researchers can receive funding for
well-designed exploratory programs, work toward larger and more finely honed
studies, and eventually take their work to scale. This availability is a great advantage
to the field. Carol Booth Olson, using her long history as director of the University
of California–Irvine Writing Project, over time worked with a cadre of collaborat-
ing teachers to carefully develop approaches to interactive strategies for teaching
reading, writing, and critical thinking. These efforts led to a series of related long-range government-funded projects, most recently a four-year Investing in Innovation Validation grant, “The Pathway to Academic Success: A Cognitive Strategies Approach to Text-Based Analytical Writing to Improve Academic Outcomes for Secondary English Learners” (Olson, 2015), preceded by a multiyear Goal 3 grant, “The Pathway Project: A Cognitive Strategies Approach to Reading and Writing Instruction for Teachers of Secondary English Language Learners” (Olson, 2006). Together, they form an exceptionally well-conceptualized and well-designed series of studies that promise to make a great contribution to literacy instruction.

Another significant body of instructional research is currently underway, largely in response to the Common Core State Standards and the need for ways to help all students meet its goals. Our concern about these studies is that in too many instances, rather than maintaining the major focus on substantive ideas and concepts of the course work, they place the skills and strategies delineated by the standards first.

Limited Notions of Instruction and Development

The expert/novice paradigm is rare but not completely gone from research in the teaching of English.

What Next?

Overall, our concerns today focus once again on methodological narrowness. Although the tide has begun to turn, vigilance is needed. A major goal of education must continue to be well-rounded and well-educated people who can lead fulfilled lives, fulfill civic responsibilities, think flexibly, and learn to do new jobs as societal needs and conditions change. High literacy and deep thinking in all coursework must continue to be our aim. Taking time away from literature, art, and music for additional time with more expository “job-like” texts may not get us where we want to go. Long-range studies are needed.

We are also concerned about the overly simplistic interpretation of the Common Core State Standards as a page-by-page cookbook for the teaching of individual skills. The particular standards were never meant to become a sole teaching goal, yet this outcome has become too commonplace. We would like to see more instructional research designed to analyze and identify the particular standards that are taught and used by students when the goal of classwork is deep thinking about important content. Some research projects within Project READI (discussed above) are analyzing students’ argumentative writing and charting the standards, offering one model of how this can be done. Also needed are studies that compare instruction focused on teaching to the standards and instruction focused on teaching to the course material (with use of the standards), as well as other related studies.

In all, work on teaching and learning strategies, cognitively engaged classrooms, identity and learning, diversity and equity, and research in other critical areas has thrived and benefited the field. Design-based research is creating opportunities
for many more teachers to become actively involved as collaborators in classroom research. Progress has continued and we have learned much. We’ve mentioned just a few superb research efforts that can substantially improve teaching and learning in ways that uphold our beliefs in excellence—beliefs we held long before 1984 and will continue to hold in the future. They create essential improvement in the kinds of learning that are at the roots of our field. What we have learned from writing this article is that with all this progress, it has been good to take stock. We have a rich research tradition, and we know a lot and are moving nicely beyond.

In Closing
This has been a fascinating exercise for us, and we hope for our readers as well. We ended our last Musings (Langer & Applebee, 1991) by stating that “we look back on our editorship with a sense of satisfaction.” The process of reading papers, pondering reviews, and arriving at our own responses enriched us as professionals; it gave us differing vantage points and perspectives from which to shape and sharpen our own ideas. Among the things we learned is that every era is one of change. But we must examine every aspect of that change. What are the theoretical vantage points? What do other fields or perspectives tell us? What in history can help us that we may have forgotten or set aside? How can we sharpen our own theoretical paradigms to be more explanatory? Most importantly, what are our goals, and how can we attain them without giving up other critical features we hold imperative to human development that are also inseparable from English language arts learning and literacy? These questions are at our field’s core and must remain.

REFERENCES


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