In this 51st volume year of *Research in the Teaching of English*, the journal turns toward classroom-based examinations of the English language arts in the twenty-first century, looking across a range of settings to conceptualize ELA at the present historical moment. In many ways, this volume year could be seen as coming full circle to return to classroom-based studies, especially when read alongside the numerous larger-scale studies featured in Volume 50, which situated languages and literacies far beyond the borders of particular English language arts classrooms. Articles in the present volume year interrogate issues on the ground and in diverse classrooms—diversity being an especially visible issue in the United States just now, given the recent demographic turning point in which underrepresented minorities are now the majority of students in our nation’s classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

Historically, the articles in this volume year can find their places within the model of English language arts advanced by Hinsdale (1896) in a book that influentially defined the verbal arts of reading, writing, and speaking as composing the “language arts.” This conception of the English language arts curriculum has been remarkably durable for over a century, with listening added in subsequent years, and recently finds itself on full display in the articulation of the Common Core State Standards in the United States. Yet the articles do not necessarily simply accept this “status quo” of what counts as English language arts curriculum. Throughout the volume year, authors energetically engage with and critically examine some of the underlying assumptions of the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). For example, in this issue, Zhihui Fang discusses close reading in the CCSS and a linguistically grounded conceptual and pedagogical response to the belief of the CCSS authors that “it is through regular interactions with complex texts that students are able to develop advanced language and literacy skills at the same time they are building rich content knowledge” (p. 114). In another, closely related article to be published in this volume year, Matthew McConn replicates a study of intensive and extensive close reading, which he places into dialogue with the CCSS. Authors in this volume year also address writing and its development.
and instruction. For example, in an upcoming Forum essay, Charles Bazerman and a team of distinguished scholars present a set of principles about writing development across the life span. Angela Zapata and Selena Van Horn offer an interview study examining high school students’ experiences with a unit of poetry writing instruction that aimed to provide a forum for taking action in the world through powerful composing practices. Adam Loretto, Sara Demartino, and Amanda J. Godley take up questions about students’ peer reviews of writing in secondary English. Jie Zhang and colleagues explore how teachers can productively organize classroom talk practices among ELL students in English language arts classrooms. And an upcoming Forum tribute remembers and honors the life of former RTE editor Arthur Applebee, who did so much to advance the field’s present understanding and conceptualization of the English language arts curriculum.

Issue 51.1 launches the volume-year conversation around the English language arts in the twenty-first century by focusing on identity issues in ELA classrooms. Leah A. Zuidema and James E. Fredricksen lead the issue by taking up questions of writerly identity, and particularly the rhetorical resources that preservice English teachers use in learning to teach and respond to students’ writing. Integrating teacher research, qualitative coding, and rhetorical analysis, Zuidema and Fredricksen report on a collaborative exchange—focused on teaching and responding to students’ writing—between preservice teachers (PSTs) at Dordt College and Boise State University. The aim of the exchange was to prepare the beginning teachers for teaching writing, as part of their university course work. Specifically, the preservice teachers used the online platform VoiceThread to respond to and dialogue with one another about eighth- and ninth-grade students’ writing. Preservice teachers also inferred what the secondary students were learning as writers and discussed what instructional actions might follow from their interpretations of the student writing. Zuidema and Fredricksen identified five categories of resources used by the PSTs to support their claims about students’ writing: understanding of students and student writing (9% of instances); knowledge of the context (10%); colleagues (11%); PSTs’ roles as writers, readers, and teachers (17%); and PSTs’ ideas and observations about writing (54%). This study contributes to the scarce literature on writing teacher preparation at the secondary level, and it offers implications for both beginning teacher education and ongoing professional development around writing.

These categories of resources or “tools” for teaching and responding to student writing, presented within a rich rhetorical framework, offer areas for continued research on preservice teachers’ writing instructional development. Particularly needed are studies that provide preservice teachers with opportunities to mobilize knowledge of student writers and of the contexts in which they are writing—admittedly, though, such study designs, especially when including more than a few participating teachers and the students who populate the classrooms where they work, can be complex and challenging within teacher education and require considerable funding and support. Interestingly, teachers draw less on their own identities, their experiences as writers, and insights from colleagues than they do
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from their ideas and observations about writing. Given the field’s interest in supporting teachers as writers and in professional development programs such as the National Writing Project, it seems that more work is needed to better understand how teachers actually do see themselves as teacher-writers in collaboration with other teacher-writers. In particular, this article begs the question of whether the writerly dispositions gained in courses or professional development settings do indeed influence how teachers teach writing and respond to student writing. Thus, this article points to a question that has been asked for some time at the intersection of writing studies and teacher education: To what extent and in what ways do teachers’ identities as writers bear on their teaching of writing?

The rest of the studies in the issue shift the focus from teachers to students and examine questions surrounding students’ identities as readers. Each of the remaining studies explores and illuminates different facets of student reading identity in secondary classrooms, paying particular attention to the discursive construction of identities in classroom spaces. In so doing, the studies build upon Enriquez’s (2011) definition of reader identity as “the accumulation of beliefs, characterizations and official documentation of what students can and are willing to do while reading printed texts” (p. 91). As Enriquez (2011) adds, “To this end, personal, social and institutional values combine through discursive norms to produce one’s official reading identity in school” (p. 91). The studies, taken together, illuminate the identity models or possibilities that are allowable and valued or devalued in certain classroom spaces. They also explore what it takes to interrupt powerful and persistent “single stories” about being a good or poor reader in a given classroom space (Adichie, 2009).

Katherine K. Frankel’s article explores how the student and teacher relationships that unfold in the figured world of the reading intervention classroom shape the degree to which a student may challenge her or his identity as a “struggling reader.” Framing identity as enacted through time and space in figured worlds, Frankel focuses a case study on two students. Both had been placed into interventionary reading classes, a placement that conflicted with the students’ own understandings of themselves as readers. Asking how the two students’ “understandings of literacy and their own reading identities interact with the figured worlds of their literacy intervention classrooms” (p. 41), Frankel finds that students complied, improvised, and self-authored in an attempt to figure/position themselves as good (rather than struggling) readers. Importantly, it was not always possible for students to reposition themselves as good readers in the eyes of classmates, teachers, and the school. Frankel found that the degree to which the students in her study successfully positioned themselves as good readers was influenced by the prior reading experiences and reading identities of all members of the reading intervention classroom space.

The study points to a broader insight, supported to various degrees by all the studies in this issue, that reading identities are interactionally contingent and relationally accomplished in (sometimes none-too-innocent) ways in classroom spaces. It follows, in turn, that the complex relationships taking place within the
figured world of the reading intervention classroom should complicate existing research on literacy interventions: "Research-based curriculum and instruction notwithstanding, the findings presented here indicate that there is a very real danger of negatively affecting students’ reading progress by enrolling them in classes that position them as deficient" (p. 56). This article well illustrates how, in trying to decolonize educational spaces, it is crucial to examine how preexisting social hierarchies and relationships (e.g., who gets labeled as a “good reader” or “bad reader” for placement into various reading classrooms) shape the social and material relationships available to learners in classrooms that, while ostensibly designed to level these inequities, too often end up reproducing them.

Leigh A. Hall, as well, picks up this theme of how reader identities interact with one another in literacy classroom spaces, arguing that it is not enough for teachers to help individual students reimagine their reading identities, for example, through increasing the quality or quantity of any one student’s talk over time. What is needed, she suggests, is the creation of a classroom ecology in which being and becoming a reader is a responsibility owned by everyone in the classroom. Her formative design study focuses on an eighth-grade English classroom, looking at how a given instructional model, aimed at supporting students’ reading identities and reading development, influenced their talk about texts and classroom reading practices. She found that all five focal students, particularly those with “reading difficulties” and “negative reading identities,” increased their talk about texts and shifted the quality of their talk about texts over time, from procedural talk to substantive talk about the reading content. However, Hall underscores how those with “higher” reading proficiency engaged in “disruptive talk” aimed at those with “lower” reading proficiency, illuminating the power differentials that travel among youth. Whatever instructional intervention may be underway, if these interactionally negotiated power dynamics among students are not recognized and addressed, then it will not be possible to achieve a classroom ecology in which everyone assumes at least some portion of responsibility for—or what Darvin and Norton (2015) powerfully conceptualize as “investment in”—everyone else in the room being and becoming a reader.

In this issue’s final research article, Wendy J. Glenn and Ricki Ginsberg examine two different learning ecologies where students engaged the secondary English language arts curriculum, and specifically literary reading. Comparing a “traditional” English class with an elective young adult literature class, the work explores how students’ identities as readers manifested in different ways across these two school-based contexts where reading instruction and learning to read were expected to occur. The young adult literature course was “intentionally modeled to support students’ socially constituted identities, and all classroom reading experiences were designed to support developing identities,” perhaps most saliently the identities of those “who feel [most] marginalized in schools” (87). The phenomenological interview study focused on five students over the course of their year in the elective class. The findings outline how, in the YAL course, students deconstructed their experiences in the traditional English language arts classroom setting; built
new conceptions of their reading selves; and assumed “greater agency in shaping their individual reader identities.” This article, then, focuses in on the individual student and the ways different classroom ecologies can provide “varying levels of opportunity to reject and/or accept ascribed reading identities” (100). It is helpful to consider this phenomenologically derived argument alongside Hall’s argument about the broader socially negotiated scene of identity work in classroom spaces. While it is surely not enough to consider individuals’ identifications around reading, as Hall argues, it is also the case that phenomenological accounts of readers’ experiences across classroom settings deserve a place in the literature. It strikes us as important to acknowledge the bidirectional, reciprocal relations that exist between “readers” and “classroom spaces.” Studies such as this run the risk of reifying the construct of classroom “context” and eliding ways that the students themselves—as active agents—are contributing to the discursive and material creation of classroom context even as the classroom context is providing a space in which they are deconstructing and reconstructing reading identities.

One issue raised by these studies is the theorization of identity, and particularly the tendency for treatments of identity to be static rather than fluid, given rather than made. Sometimes a tension can be found between the theoretical grounding of a study (e.g., agent-centered accounts of identity,) and design decisions made in the study. A potential objection, for example, might emerge in response to the seeming a priori “givenness” of reader identities (the high proficiency reader/positive versus low proficiency reader/negative reading identity in Hall’s study or the “struggling reader identity” in Glenn and Ginsberg’s study) that get set up in study designs (e.g., participant selection using standardized test scores in reading or labels like “struggling reader”). An alternative sort of inquiry about student identity such as that pursued by scholars of linguistic anthropology working in classrooms (e.g., Wortham, 2006) might push toward a richer documentation of how student identifications (note the use of a more process-oriented term, “identification” vs. “identity”) come into being over time through the dialogic dynamics of student and teacher talk about texts. For Wortham and other scholars of identity-in-motion, a model of identity evolves over time, interactionally, and can be traced through careful study of classroom talk-in-interaction over time, in the tradition of conversation analysis or other discourse analytic traditions. With regard to this modeling of identity, it would be theoretically inconsistent for a researcher to begin a study with labels of “good” or “poor” or “struggling” readers for students, whether those identities are generated through test scores or student self-report or teacher designation or school tracking. Rather, the scholar would look for how reading identities get interactionally constructed in the give and take of classroom discourse. Another objection might relate to researcher delineation between “good” and “poor” readers, which may have some uses for a teacher, but too often casts those labeled as “poor” or “struggling” readers into a position of deficiency, often moral deficiency.

We are also left pondering how various kinds of study data and settings do or do not allow researchers to make claims about “reader identity.” No one single
journal issue can touch upon all aspects of reader or writer identity, and certainly it is a limitation, for example, that many—but not all—of the study designs featured in this issue focus on reader and writer identities in predominantly white universities, schools, and classroom spaces. The racialization (and racial histories) of identity, while mentioned in demographic descriptions of the schools and several of the focal students, have not become central components of study design. Similarly, other rich intersections of identity and reading go unmined in this issue—for example, religious identifications of students and teachers (e.g., Dávila, 2015) or sexual orientations of students and teachers (e.g., Blackburn, 2003), to give but a few possibilities. We think it is particularly fruitful to think about how the intersectionality of identifications—whether racial, religious, ethnic, or other—comes into relevance in diverse classrooms where the English language arts are studied and taught.

In this issue’s Forum, Zhihui Fang assesses the Common Core State Standards’ stance on close reading, a focus that has been rigorously critiqued within English education. Fang places the CCSS emphasis on close reading of complex texts into a historical and epistemological perspective, noting that this approach to texts derives from the era of formalist literary studies. He does not, however, discuss close reading as a consequence; rather, he argues that close reading should not just focus on the text, but rather involves interaction among the reader, the task, and the context. The essay overviews existing models for teaching close reading within literacy pedagogy, bringing to light recent work that involves students in systematic exploration of the linguistic, discursive, semiotic features of various sorts of texts as part of the broader project of learning skills and strategies for making sense of texts—a program he and colleagues call functional language analysis, which derives from the Hallidayan tradition of systemic functional linguistics. Functional language analysis, Fang suggests, “offers teachers a potent vehicle for engaging students in detailed, thoughtful, and critical reading, providing them with insights into genre- and discipline-specific ways of making meaning and infusing ideology through language” (p. 109). Fang highlights one pedagogical routine for developing close readings with disciplinary texts that is grounded in the approaches to close reading discussed in the essay. Finally, the essay discusses a set of important critical questions and debates that continue to surround close reading: To what extent can it work alongside critical literacy approaches? How can teachers and preservice teachers build capacity for the kind of close, linguistically grounded work with texts suggested by the research and scholarship outlined here? How can close reading be grounded in a rich and integrated (vs. isolated) language arts curriculum? How can close reading be supported in such a way that the reader does not get lost? This engagement with the Common Core State Standards continues in an upcoming Forum essay, in which Jory Brass takes up a more critical reading of the Common Core State Standards through the lens of governance theories. As the inaugural issue of this volume year, which explores classroom contexts for language arts, this issue of RTE delivers a set of articles that complicate understandings of reader identity and point to the need for further
research on processes of developing readerly identifications and the implications of these processes for the inclusive classroom.

REFERENCES


