Editors’ Introduction

Defining and Doing the “English Language Arts” in Twenty-First Century Classrooms and Teacher Education Programs

Mary M. Juzwik  
Michigan State University

Kevin Smith  
Northeastern University

Ellen Cushman  
Northeastern University

Cori McKenzie  
Michigan State University

In this issue, authors continue exploring practices, standards, and ideologies surrounding the English language arts in studies located both in K–12 classrooms and in a university-based teacher education literacy classroom. As we noted in the introduction to the previous issue, the notion of the “English language arts” on display in the Common Core State Standards in the United States—and perhaps similar patterns can be found in standards documents globally—has held steady for well over 100 years in US schools and teacher education settings (e.g., Hinsdale, 1896). While the last issue took up ELA classroom practices as intersecting with questions of identity and literacy, this issue points toward a broader question: What is the aim of ELA teaching and teacher education in a multilingual, pluralistic, twenty-first-century world? Some believe that the teaching of English is value-neutral, grounded simply in the teaching and learning of basic skills called “the language arts.” Some scholars have critiqued this skills orientation by arguing for a personal growth model of English and of learning to teach English; others have argued for the ideological nature of English; and yet others have posited English education as a site for reproduction and, potentially, disruption of enduring societal inequities. We see all of these possibilities on display in the present issue.

The first three papers focus on developing students’ writing practices and skills, literary reading comprehension skills, and text-based discussion proficiencies. Thus, the papers can be placed within a significant history and trajectory of conceptualizing the English language arts curriculum as reading, writing, and speaking/listening—as a set of skills, practices, and capacities for the verbal arts of (the English) language. The last two papers, however, complicate matters by addressing and making explicit certain possibilities for the ideological and moral aims of English teaching.

Adam Loretto, Sara DeMartino, and Amanda Godley’s paper, “Secondary Students’ Perceptions of Peer Review of Writing,” focuses on writing and specifically peer review across disciplines. The authors investigate 513 high school students’ perceptions of a particular online peer review system (SWoRD: Scaffolded Writing and Rewriting in the Disciplines). The study examines the results of interviews with 15 teachers and a 30-question survey of students in their classrooms who used...
the reviewing system. The research team administered the study over three years, across several contexts (four high schools, one economically and racially diverse), and across subject areas. The study was based on two questions: “What are the perceptions of students in grades 9–12 of the overall helpfulness of peer review? What are the students’ perceptions of the affordances and challenges of specific features of peer review?” The large-scale study design afforded consideration of such variables as differences in perceptions of peer review among students with extensive (vs. minimal) experiences with peer review and differences among students across school contexts. Using qualitative and quantitative analysis (including descriptive statistics, \( t \) tests, and factor analysis), the authors found that secondary students in the study valued three primary affordances of peer review in general and specifically in the SWoRD system: (a) the anonymity of writers and reviewers; (b) the opportunities to review other students’ writing; and (c) the opportunity to receive feedback from multiple reviewers. One key implication of the study is the recommendation that secondary teachers offer students opportunities for anonymous peer review of classroom writing (akin to the kinds of blind review that journal authors receive), providing some distance from the social relationships and pressures among students in a given classroom.

Relative to our organizing question about the purpose of the English language arts, this study focuses on writing instruction, specifically on instructional methods and setup of peer review, a fairly standard (if inconsistently operationalized) practice associated with writing instruction in secondary schools. As the authors observe, the research literature on secondary English and specifically secondary writing studies has not devoted much attention to the practice of peer review, and even less to reporting students’ experiences and perspectives on peer review. Without a doubt, this study offers a significant contribution to that growing body of work. Relative to the aims of the English language arts and the teaching of English, we would locate the study toward the margins insofar as it highlights how, increasingly, writing is seen as discipline-specific (even at the secondary level) and is not (and should not be) restricted to English classrooms. Writing is not just English language arts; it is also a practice unfolding across disciplines, in communities, and in workplaces. Nonetheless, because the study does include English language arts classrooms, it finds a place within a longstanding conceptualization of ELA that aligns with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Yet, at the same time, this study assumes a social-interactional, or dialogic, theory of writing: in this work, acts of writing are akin to conversational utterances; as such, they respond to previous utterances and anticipate future utterances or responses (e.g., Nystrand, 1986). This way of approaching writing—as a historically unfolding dialogic process and practice—does not seem to be what Hinsdale had in mind when he wrote about composing as one of the English language arts in 1896, nor does it seem to be the theory underlying writing and its development in standards documents such as the Common Core. Yet such dialogic ways of approaching writing and peer review have been substantially developed in research on English education and related disciplines and deserve continued attention.
Matthew McConn’s article shifts our focus from writing to literary reading in ELA classrooms, engaging a nearly century-old debate about whether close (intensive) reading or wide (extensive) reading is the better approach for literary study in English language arts. Grounds for the necessity of this research might include students’ (and perhaps also teachers’) joy in the act and process of literary study, as evoked by Billy Collins’ “Introduction to Poetry,” (1988) which juxtaposes the playful possibilities of poetic or aesthetic reading experience with more analytic or information-focused readings of literary works.

Indeed, the choice to study literature itself is noteworthy, against the backdrop of the expansion of reading practice and instruction in secondary English to include a good deal more than literature, as expository, persuasive, informational, and other texts all now vie for a place in the secondary reading curriculum. McConn, for his part, keeps his focus on “literature” (a term which he does not define), and specifically a comparison of the effects of intensive reading (defined as “close reading”) versus extensive reading (reading more, with less focus on details and more focus on the amount of reading) on students’ reading comprehension and their capabilities for literary analysis. The design is something of a (regrettably, we think) scarcity in the pages of RTE, and more broadly in the field of literacy studies today: a replication study. Employing a quasi-experimental design, the study replicated a portion of Coryell (1927), which found an extensive approach to reading instruction to be as effective (and sometimes more effective) than an intensive approach. Study participants included 114 eleventh-grade students attending a large, predominantly Hispanic, urban high school. Similar to Coryell (1927), McConn concludes, “In the time between the pretest and the posttest, students in the extensive classes read six times more literature than those in the intensive classes. Even though the extensive group read a larger amount of literature than the intensive group, the results of this study suggest that for the purpose of improving the comprehension of literature, both the intensive and extensive methods are equally effective” (p. 176). Results also indicate that extensive approaches are as effective as intensive approaches for improving the ability to analyze literature.

It seems that McConn’s contribution to the ongoing scholarly conversation about “close reading” (and we are thinking here, too, about Feng’s[2016] article in our last issue) is to raise the question of whether and when close reading is appropriate as a focus in ELA. It seems intuitively obvious that close reading can be a vital skill for all sorts of societal and personal projects, but so too can extensive reading. And, at its worst, close reading can feel like a futile attempt to “tie the poem to a chair with rope/and torture a confession out of it” (Collins, 1988). This article offers a timely suggestion that more research on the phenomenon and more consideration of the goal of literary reading in schools is needed. We also see a need for nuance in studies going forward—for example, the question of what sorts of literary and literate practices intensive and/or extensive reading might invite students to engage. Further, as Feng’s (2016) article demonstrates, the categories of “intensive” and “extensive” are coarse, and can be further complicated and explored, suggesting the contributions that might be made by philosophical
lines of inquiry on deep versus wide literary reading. McConn does not define precisely what he means by “literature” and “literary” study in secondary English, and this question is also well worth pondering. Juzwik and colleagues (in press) have advanced the idea of English language arts as a space for students to pursue the “verbal arts,” expanding the traditional connotations of “literature” to include all sorts of multi-semiotic folk and popular textual (and more-than-textual) traditions and interpretive practices, from hip-hop aesthetics to indigenous storytelling practices as they unfold in a variety of contexts, to prayers and other religious literacy practices, and much more. Studying the verbal arts is of course one part of literary response (somewhat like traditional “literary study,” perhaps), but producing verbal art in response to such study adds another, richer layer to the literature curriculum, and could put notions of “extensive” and “intensive” reading into a broader context of verbally artful literate activity that goes beyond literary analysis to literary performativity, and builds capacity to make verbally artful new creations from literary reading.

The third paper in this issue, by Jie Zhang, Chunling Niu, Shahbaz Munawar, and Richard C. Anderson, “What Makes a More Proficient Discussion Group in English Language Learners’ Classrooms? Influence of Teacher Talk and Student Backgrounds,” turns to speaking about literary reading in collaborative student discussion. While the ELA curricular focus in the focal classrooms appears to be on literary study, and talking to learn about literature, the research and the article actually focus their attention on a longstanding component of English language arts—speaking—as a literate practice in its own right. At least in US schooling, speaking in ELA was historically grounded in the arts of rhetoric and the cultivation of the eloquent individual (Juzwik et al., in press). This study, however, is more interested in the capacity to speak proficiently within a collaborative group of peers—in keeping with the research on ELA classroom speaking that’s been in progress since at least the 1990s. More specifically, the authors examined how students’ initial language and literacy skills and home language backgrounds, alongside teacher talk moves, influenced students’ proficiency in literary discussions. The discourse analytic study focused on four groups participating in eight peer-led collaborative reasoning (CR) literature discussions in two 5th-grade classrooms serving Spanish-dominant multilinguals.

Of particular salience to the study was a comparison of streams of spoken texts across groups. The authors identified three types of talk: (1) nontransactive (“short exchanges consisting of assertions and counter-assertions; not connected to previous utterance”); (2) cumulative (“students taking over, integrating, and applying the perspectives of their peers, but without real disagreement or constructive conflict; characterized by confirmations, expansions, and elaborations”); and (3) exploratory (“students challenging or counterchallenging while justifying challenges and offering alternative perspectives; characterized by constructive and critical engagements”) (p. 191). The authors found greater group variability in discussion proficiency in the mainstream class, where the more proficient group talked significantly more and used more exploratory talk, and less nontransactive talk and cumulative talk, than the less proficient group. Nontransactive talk, on the other hand, predominated in group discussion in the bilingual classroom. As
shown in the discussion excerpts, students in the bilingual class (especially the less proficient group) seemed more reluctant, or less able, to elaborate ideas in extended language.

Overall, the study found that “students talked a lot longer with more turns and greater fluency in the mainstream class (especially the more proficient group) than in the bilingual class. The teacher in the mainstream class talked much less than the teacher in the bilingual class. The ratio of teacher to student talk in the bilingual class . . . was almost three times that of the mainstream class.” The authors also found that the two teachers differed greatly in their ways of facilitating CR discussions: The teacher in the bilingual class asked more factual questions and employed more turn-taking management moves than the teacher in the mainstream class. Thus, the authors interpret the findings to observe that the less proficient discussion in the bilingual class could not be attributed solely to “lower English proficiency,” but also to the teacher’s unwillingness to relinquish control over topics and turn-taking. The mainstream teacher, by contrast, used more scaffolding moves, such as stepping in and reminding. Thus, the teachers’ practices did influence the level of student participation in discussions, a finding that comports with previous classroom discourse studies on literary discussion. But it is worth highlighting, as the authors note, that this finding may well be explained by the two teachers’ experience levels with CR—the bilingual teacher was new to CR (having had one day of orientation to it), while the mainstream teacher had been practicing CR for 10 years. An implication of the study, according to the authors, is that to improve students’ discourse practices in the long term, teachers need to understand how and why a particular talk move they might employ could support or hinder students’ thinking about text. But teacher talk moves are not the only variable in play: the results also suggest that group discussion quality is associated with oral English skills among “limited English proficient students,” and with reading comprehension among fluent English language learners.

Although the authors do not situate this study within broader conversations about the purposes of English language arts curriculum in a pluralistic society, we can’t help but consider this question as we meditate on the speaking practices of Spanish-dominant multilinguals. For example, we can easily place this article in conversation with a trajectory of scholarship on students’ right to their own languages (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1974) in English language arts classrooms; however, work in that vein takes a considerably different political/ideological stance, arguing for the importance of creating spaces for plurivocal participation in a pluralist democracy. The authors of this study are much more narrowly focused on discourse processes, which may be disciplinarily appropriate, but we do wonder if studies in this vein might benefit from consideration of more inclusive possible shifts in terminologies: What does it mean to introduce a term such as “Spanish-dominant multilingual” as opposed to “Spanish-dominant ELL”? We are not the first to observe that embedded in the phrase “English language learner” is an English-dominant assumption that certain (Dominant American English) ways of speaking are privileged and to be valued more than others in a fifth-grade classroom, even one serving such a diverse student population. What if the Spanish-speaking students could be seen as bringing an
important asset to collaborative reasoning discussions, one that might help students learn how to participate more effectively in a multilingual society where it cannot be assumed that everyone shares Dominant American English as a lingua franca?

The final study, “Leaning In to Discomfort: Preparing Literacy Teachers for Gender and Sexual Diversity,” by Sara Staley and Bethy Leonardi, departs from the previous three articles in that it focuses on practices and politics of literacy teacher education, rather than on a specific domain (reading, writing, or speaking) of the English language arts curriculum. It further shifts the focus toward the issue of sexual heteronormativity in schools, in English language arts curriculum, and in ELA teacher education. The authors, who identify as queer, critique ELA teacher education (and, to be sure, teacher preparation more broadly) for its complicity in the “resounding silence around gender and sexual diversity” (p. 209). In light of recent acts of violence against those who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ, authors’ term), the authors suggest that ELA teaching and teacher education should intervene in an overt, didactic, and directive way to disrupt the prevailing heteronormativity of our society. Among the subject areas, ELA seems particularly well poised as a site for such interruption, because of the possibilities inherent in the literate practices of writing, literary reading, and collaborative speaking for exploring moral issues, problems, and questions.

Specifically, the authors offer a small-scale empirical account of teacher educators grappling with the challenges of integrating gender and sexual diversity as a central focus of a methods course curriculum they developed and taught for preservice and inservice literacy teachers (of 13 participants, 11 self-identified as female, 2 as male). Focal course materials and practices included readings on and around gender and sexual diversity from literacy researchers and popular media, fishbowl conversations, a guest lecture, and an event titled “An Evening with LGBTQ Youth and Allies.” Data sources for the study included audiotapes of in-class fishbowls and discussion threads on the course blog. The authors mobilized the psychoanalytic notion of crisis (following Kumashiro, 2002), to analyze these data in a way that allowed them to focus on the emotional aspects of participants’ engagement with gender and sexual identity. They asked: “How did students respond to a discomforting process of unlearning initiated by the methods curriculum’s emphasis on [gender and sexual diversity]?” (p. 217).

By focusing on the experiences of a small number of participants, the authors illustrate the emergence of teacher candidates’ emotional discomfort, their wrestling with praxis, and their process of “leaning in” to emotional discomfort as they grappled with gender and sexual diversity and the invitations to resist heteronormativity. In the authors’ words:

Findings suggest that participants who were willing to move toward their discomfort—what we call a deliberate move to lean in—positioned themselves to become strong advocates for queer youth. We argue that emotional discomfort should be figured as a productive tension in queer interventions in English education. Toward that end, we offer leaning in as a generative tool for grappling with the dynamics of heterosexism, homophobia, and broader oppression.” (p. 209)
Here, the meaning of “leaning in” is different from popular uses of the phrase associated with Sandberg’s (2013) notion of corporate women’s determined driving toward accomplishment in male-dominated work environments; for Staley and Leonardi, the term evokes a kind of opening up: “the desire, willingness, and capacity to sit alongside the discomfort that accompanies resisting repetition, desiring to unlearn, and recognizing that knowledge is always partial” (p. 223). It strikes us as inviting an almost meditative or contemplative stance—a capacity to sit with discomfort, observe it, and detach oneself from it, in order to learn from it and grow through it. Thus the study supports an idea that is gaining wider traction in broader societal conversations about change and injustice: emotional discomfort should not be perceived as wholly negative; indeed, it should be seen as a necessary and generative force for change when “grappling with the dynamics of heterosexism, homophobia, and broader oppression” (p. 209).

In terms of the broader conversation about the purposes of ELA in which we see this issue participating, this article indeed offers an intense provocation. First, the piece untethers itself from the traditional categories of the English language arts (e.g., learning to read, write, speak or listen) to offer a clearly defined moral mandate and purpose for English education—the undoing, unlearning, and resisting of oppressive heteronormativity in schools and in society. Reading, writing, listening, and speaking become relegated to instrumental means within that framework. This moral mandate sits alongside other ongoing responsibilities, such as antiracist English education. Such moral articulations of English education, especially those around sexual and gender diversity, face a big challenge in a religiously pluralistic society, where a significant number of folks would oppose such a goal on the grounds of observing and expressing their religious faith. And this concern does not stop at fundamentalist Christians in the United States, but also includes Orthodox Jews, Muslims, and other practitioners of religious faith traditions where notions of sexual purity are well defined and powerful ideologies for lived communities. Indeed, it may not be too much of a stretch to argue that religious communities are critical sites where sexual heteronormativity is borne, taught, and sustained. Parents and communities feel that much is at stake in maintaining these social sexual norms.

Therefore, we suggest to the field that the next step for scholars who would like to advance anti-heteronormative English education is to contend with religious pluralism and the ideologies that powerfully shape heteronormativity in classrooms, schools, and communities. Particularly relevant to English classrooms, moreover, are ways that scriptural authority (and the textual and literate practices surrounding scriptural interpretation and authority) gets claimed and evoked for the establishment and maintenance of heteronormativity—these processes as they unfold in various religious and para-religious communities deserve careful study of the kind that language and literacy scholars are well equipped to undertake. Such paths of inquiry point to complex questions about the moral mandate(s) for English in a religiously pluralistic society, where not all students, families, teachers, or communities share (or, given interventions such as that described in this article, will become persuaded to share) the authors’ stance on the moral good of unlearning heteronormativity.
Such critical inquiry into the structuring epistemologies of ELA has been central to the work we have been promoting within our editorial term (see our introductions in 49.4, 50.2, and 51.1), and such inquiry is precisely what Jory Brass offers in his Forum essay, “A Governmental Perspective on the Common Core,” which closes this issue. Brass reads the Common Core State Standards through a governmentality perspective, drawing on a framework that focuses attention on: (a) neoliberalism, which represents modes of thought that legitimate certain aims, objectives, and strategies of government, and (b) technologies that provide mechanisms through which political rationalities are constructed and accomplished. Reading the CCSS through the lens of the “political rationalities” reveals how the Standards have steered curriculum, teaching, and teacher education through “high-stakes testing, outcomes-based performance management, and the privatization, automation, and outsourcing of core educational processes” (p. 230). This reading highlights how the rationalities of the CCSS might run counter to other ways of imagining “professional conduct” in education, such as emphasis on an “ethics of care, public service, autonomy, and collegiality” (p. 237). What is perhaps most fruitful about this reading of the Common Core is its highlighting of the fact that the CCSS and other standards documents are not morally neutral—they work toward political interests and moral purposes. It is wise to evaluate those purposes, and how students, teachers, and researchers sit within them, and also to invite our students—whether K–12 students, teacher candidates, or graduate students—to do this evaluation alongside us.

The issue closes, we think fittingly, with a tribute to former RTE editor Arthur Applebee, who died in the fall of 2015 and who himself, through his scholarship and research, helped to establish the premises for the thematic exploration of the purpose(s) of the English language arts that we’ve mapped in this introduction. We are grateful to the contributors who lead us in remembering how Arthur has shaped the conversations happening today in the pages of this journal.

Finally, we have an introduction to the 2016 Annotated Bibliography of Research in the Teaching of English, available on the RTE website: http://www.ncte.org/journals/rte/biblios. We hope that seasoned scholars and emerging researchers alike will find it a useful resource.

REFERENCES


Promising Researcher Award Winners

The recipients of the 2016 NCTE Promising Researcher Award Competition in Recognition of Bernard O’Donnell are Tamara Butler, Michigan State University, East Lansing, and Christian Ehret, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec. They describe their work as follows.

Dr. Butler is an assistant professor of English education in the Department of English (and the African American and African Studies Program) at Michigan State University. She received her PhD in Education (Multicultural and Equity Studies in Education) from The Ohio State University in 2014. Through her work with summer enrichment programs and community engagement projects, Dr. Butler worked closely with dedicated educators and high school students in Columbus, Ohio, and she is deeply grateful for all of them. In an effort to expand the boundaries of activism to include youth critical literacies work within the classroom, her research highlights the work of four female high school students of color as they bring attention to human sex trafficking. Working at the intersections of critical literacies, culturally sustaining education, and Ethnic Studies, Dr. Butler explores how art, storytelling, and other creative processes can create spaces for youth, community members, and educators to collectively engage in mobilizing and consciousness-raising efforts. As a native of the South Carolina Sea Islands, Dr. Butler is currently working with members of Sea Island communities on a project involving the connections between land, teaching, storytelling, and activism.

Dr. Ehret is an assistant professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University in Montréal, Québec. He taught high school English in Athens, Georgia, before completing his PhD in Learning, Teaching, and Diversity at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. Through his research, he desires to know and express more of our affective lives together, especially as they emerge in processes of making, reading, writing, and calling to action. This work has included anthropological engagements alongside youth in middle schools and high schools and also in children's hospitals and other informal learning environments. Across projects, Dr. Ehret has been, and continues to be, most interested in building a more moving empiricism for knowing and expressing how affective dimensions of social life produce ethical charges for more just modes of being in the present.

The Promising Researcher Award is sponsored by the NCTE Standing Committee on Research. Submitted manuscripts are evaluated based on their statements of research problems, reviews of relevant literature, methodology and data analysis, grounding of evidence, significance of results, and clarity and style.