Editors’ Introduction

The Long View of Research in the Teaching of English

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Constructing the final issue of our tenure as coeditors has given us time to reflect not only on the scholarship offered through RTE these past five years, but also on the field of language and literacy research more broadly. It has provided an opportunity to identify gaps that remain in our knowledge of still-underrepresented groups (e.g., differently abled and neurotypical populations), as well as the state of knowledge-making related to development and identity. It has also raised questions of where we are methodologically as a field, and where we are (or should be) going. In our final editorial introduction, we wish to take a moment to reflect on where we’ve been and where, as a journal and a field, we may be going.

Since the start of our editorship, the reach of RTE has grown significantly. While we’re unable to track readership directly, the number of countries submitting to the journal has increased 50% (to 37 countries represented in 2017), and international representation of reviewers has consistently expanded. Similarly, the impact factor of the journal has continued to improve over time (reaching 1.435 for the 2016 year). We are most proud, however, of the diversity of voices—in both authorship and population focus—that have graced the pages of the journal these past five years. We hope that researchers will continue to explore literacy in contexts outside of those already well-represented in the literature, as well as to share the voices of those we seldom hear from.

In our efforts to establish high-quality research, we have asked ourselves: What is gained and lost as the field moves into more large-scale studies—like Donahue and Foster-Johnson’s and Wilder and Yagelski’s in this issue, or Anderson, Anson, Gonyea, & Paine’s (2015), Brown and Aull’s (2017), and Duke et al.’s (2013)? These studies encompass a grand scale of data and corpora to better understand patterns in development, transfer, and rhetorical moves. Along the way, they provide fine-grained analysis of specific textual features and graphic elements that indicate noticeable rhetorical and comprehension differences within and across contexts. The information about what semiotic processes look like across contexts presented in corpus studies offers both a generalizable and particularized perspective on learning. For all they offer, though, they provide fewer insights into the social workings of literacies in terms of power, value, structures, and ideologies. Equally important, then, is the deeply contextualized data presented in studies like Kinloch,
Burkhard, and Penn’s (2017), Qin’s, and Metz’s (both this issue), which can really attend to the complexity of language and literacy in situ. How do we reconcile what one type of study both offers and lacks without labeling it as accounting for only one unique context or individual, or one “so-called mode” (Prior, 2017) of literate activity? How, as a field, do we work toward developing a more expanded and expansive, meta-level view of learning and teaching?

The research presented in this issue highlights these thorny questions of methodological directions in our field. Donahue and Foster-Johnson’s work, for example, demonstrates the challenge of exploring transfer and transition, no matter how it is addressed methodologically. Their longitudinal study provides a unique contribution to the scholarship in that it offers insights into individual rhetorical features of writing as students transition across learning contexts and reuse or adapt learning across disciplinary settings. What is gained in generalizability in this study is nothing more or less than insights into the partial, slow, and yet significant integration of specific rhetorical choices across time and disciplines. What this study cannot show, however, studies like Garcia, Stamatis, and Kelly’s can, in this case through their analysis of identity formation as it relates to the integration of technology in three ninth-grade English classrooms. With little research into young students’ identity formation as it relates to technology use in classrooms, this article’s findings are useful and worthwhile, complicating our understanding of digital literacy in young populations, despite the fact that such an analysis may not offer generalizable findings precisely because it is so context-bound. We recall Scribner and Cole’s famous work, *The Psychology of Literacy* (1981), which was made possible by a team of researchers from different disciplines, and researchers who themselves artfully fused disciplines to offer insights into culture, schooling, and literacy. We are encouraged by teams of scholars working together to explore complex topics. We are eager to see literacy studies continue in this important trend of cross-disciplinary collaborative work to leverage various methodologies in efforts to produce relevant, timely, and generalizable findings—findings that can, and should, have implications for many audiences of practitioners, policy makers, and administrators.

In addition to pluriversality in methodology, we’ve also been considering questions of perspective on language and its fluidity—particularly from a global and international viewpoint. Submissions from international authors have increased steadily over our tenure, yet as editors following our reviewers and our own desk-reject policy, we’ve continued to publish work largely from anglophone authors. Often, our selection of articles (initially, at least) is in response to relevance and scope of the work in relation to the journal’s audience. Yet, from a decolonial perspective, we are still mindful that the work of any journal editor is to maintain epistemic hierarchies with only modest innovations possible. The extent to which epistemic hierarchies might be changed to create a more pluriversal set of understandings and knowledge-making perspectives is a question still up for debate. What does epistemic delinking look like for an editor when the primary responsibility of the editor is to be a steward of the legacy of the journal? And what does this
look like when the generic conventions of this journal present limited room for innovations in understanding?

In our tenure, we have given considerable attention to multilingual/translingual writers. We have placed a strong emphasis on publishing early- and mid-career scholars of color. And we have featured research that reflects the literate lives of diverse youths, teens, and college-aged writers. However, we note that more research needs to be done and published in the areas of neurodiversity, indigenous peoples’ education, preservice teacher training for the twenty-first-century classroom, social justice and advocacy, and learning outside of the confines of school. While the current issue does not take up these areas directly, the articles do, in many ways, get us closer to thinking about what social justice in the classroom looks like and ways to assist preservice teachers in their critical pedagogy.

**In This Issue**

Considering our earlier questions of methodology, Christiane Donahue and Lynn Foster-Johnson’s “Liminality and Transition: Text Features in Postsecondary Student Writing” offers a large-corpus study of student writing in the first year. Here, Donahue and Foster-Johnson use a longitudinal case study, employing quantitative statistical analysis, to explore the ways in which certain textual features were carried through from a first-year writing (FWY) course to a first-year seminar (FYS). In this work, the authors asked whether the texts produced in first-year writing courses “show any reuse and adaptation of writing knowledge” in another context (the first-year seminar)—and if so, what that looks like in practice (p. 364). Donahue and Foster-Johnson’s work is interesting not only for its approach, but for its population, as well. Working comprehensively, they explore the transfer of writing features in a cohort that took three writing courses sequentially (fall FWY, winter FWY, spring FYS), a cohort that took two writing courses sequentially (fall FWY, winter FYS), and a cohort that followed the same two-course sequence (FWY, FYS) but in the winter and spring terms.

The findings of the study provide insights not just into what students do in these courses, but how. For example, the data shows stability in the types of textual features employed (explicit theses, use of external sources, etc.), but variability in the quantity. In one cohort, the “use of an explicit thesis between the two-term FWY course and FYS” increased, while the “use of context in their introduction types” decreased (p. 369). The study also highlights relationships between rhetorical moves and purpose for writing (e.g., selecting a summative thesis when writing to inform and a descriptive thesis when summarizing a source’s argument). Interestingly, the authors highlight the presence of a “reset effect,” whereby students employ a particular facet and, over the course of the term, increase their use of that facet—only to “reset” at the start of the second course. The study highlights the need for additional research into the ways students use specific rhetorical approaches in their writing across contexts, situation, and time, and how those changes intersect with specific learning outcomes in course work.
Laura Wilder and Robert P. Yagelski’s “Describing Cross-Disciplinary Analytic Moves in First-Year College Student Writing” pairs nicely with Donahue and Foster-Johnson’s study in that it offers important research into whether what is being taught in first-year composition (FYC) classrooms and what instructors expect from FYC student writing correspond. Using a large corpus data set (860 student papers), the authors ask, “What cross-disciplinary analytic moves are evident in the writing of first-semester college students?” and “To what extent does the presence or absence of these analytic moves correlate to instructors’ evaluations of the quality of students’ analytical writing?” (p. 386).

As the authors highlight, “at the college level, students are often expected to perform a variety of sophisticated intellectual moves in their writing with little or no evidence that such expectations are reasonable” (p. 383) The findings of their study suggest that students are not being prepared in high school for the level of critical thinking and analysis most FYC instructors expect. Similarly, these results highlight that instructors may not be cognizant of the expectations they hold for students in their classrooms. As the authors explain, “One possible implication of our findings may be that many students entering college are not developmentally ready for such writing tasks and fall back on traditional ‘research report’ strategies that circumvent analysis. However, it may instead be the case that typical first-year writing instruction inadequately prepares students for disciplinary analytic writing tasks and that research is needed to develop new instructional approaches for this purpose” (p. 382).

In “Invisible Potential: The Social Contexts of Technology in Three 9th-Grade ELA Classrooms,” Antero Garcia, Kristina Stamatis, and Mary Kelly take first steps to explore the ways in which “talking about and engaging in ELA-based inquiry related to technology actually provides avenues for students to share beliefs about their own identity and the world around them” (p. 405). Drawing on classroom observations, interviews with students and teachers, and analysis of artifacts, the authors explore how students in three 9th-grade classrooms understood technology, how this understanding shaped their learning in English/language arts, and what it meant for students’ enactment of identity within school and beyond.

Garcia, Stamatis, and Kelly’s research highlights the continued invisibility of technology within the classroom despite its increasing use. The work forces us to ask: What counts as technology within and outside the classroom when devices such as Chromebooks, iPads, and cellular phones are ubiquitous and embedded into everyday life? And do our identities as constructed or amplified through social media, video games, or technological skill influence our in-school identities? The authors’ research suggests that on a conscious level, young people are not aware of the ways in which their technologically mediated social identities intersect with their in-school identities, and that devices like phones are used as tools for interaction with social spheres outside of schooling and largely ignored as something to be used within school. At the same time, the study clearly demonstrates the ways in which educators and the context of schooling privilege certain types of technological savviness: skill in video gaming, for example, is frowned upon.
while the ability to “get an AI to say something” (p. 417) is not only a sanctioned activity, but also one that can grant the user certain allowances.

In “Doing Funny’ and Performing Masculinity: An Immigrant Adolescent Boy’s Identity Negotiation and Language Learning in One US ESL Classroom,” Kongji Qin uses a critical sociolinguistic ethnographic approach to study the experience of one male L2 student, Tiger, in the context of a high school ESL class. This article provides important insight into the ways “masculinity intersects with race, ethnicity, class, and language to shape minoritized boys’ identity negotiation and school experiences” (p. 429). While the focus is on how Tiger “performed” certain discoursal acts (i.e., played the class clown) and the ways he negotiated his identity in this academic space, this research also speaks to the influence of pedagogical practices on student performance.

Qin’s focus in this piece is not to critique the curriculum choices of Tiger’s teacher, Mrs. Brown; however, in reading his account of the schooling experience, it is difficult to ignore how challenging it could be for any student to remain engaged in rote, routinized activities that leave little room for student invention. At the same time, we can see how the ways a student reacts to this routinization via performativity construct an identity to which the teacher responds. In Tiger’s case, Mrs. Brown “positioned Tiger as a ‘problem’ student who did not ‘apply himself’ and often went off-task to engage in ‘interactions with other students that do not relate to academic task’” (p. 446). Qin’s analysis of Tiger’s experience highlights the need for inclusive pedagogies in that Tiger’s “doing funny” was a direct response to his marginalization within this academic construct and an attempt “to carve out a social space for himself” (p. 447).

Similarly, in “Challenges of Confronting Dominant Language Ideologies in the High School English Classroom,” Mike Metz takes up the question of how language ideologies are communicated within the classroom context when educators “express an intent to promote a critical awareness of language” (p. 456). Through an examination of five teachers’ presentation and positioning of language in a literature classroom, Metz explores the ways in which counter-narratives of literacy are (or are not) conveyed to linguistically diverse students.

The educators featured in this work all articulated a “desire to promote counter-narratives of language, power, and identity” through their teaching (p. 460). However, as Metz’s findings demonstrate, such attempts can “be undercut by the influence of the [Standard English] master narrative” (p. 472). Importantly, Metz points to the need for pedagogical supports in teacher preparation to help critically aware educators effectively put knowledge into practice. This scholarship contributes is a detailed look at the day-to-day struggles of educators in the classroom.

It has been our honor and privilege to be editors of Research in the Teaching of English. We have appreciated sharing the work of new authors and authors whose legacy has helped shape the impact of this journal. We have every confidence in the incoming editorial team of outstanding researchers who have published in these pages over the course of our term. Congratulations and best wishes to Gerald Campano, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, and Amy Stornaiuolo.
REFERENCES


Change in Authorship

We wish to note a change in authorship for “Escribiendo Juntos: Toward a Collaborative Model of Multiliterate Family Literacy in English Only and Anti-immigrant Contexts,” published in the November 2017 issue (Vol. 52, No. 2). The authorship will now include both Jessica Singer Early and Tracey Flores in the online (PDF) version of this article. All citations to this article should reflect this change in authorship.