Editors’ Introduction

Collective Knowledge Production and Action

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“My theory is, strong people don’t need strong leaders”
—Ella Baker

In April 1977, the Combahee River Collective—a collective of Black feminists who had been meeting together since 1974—issued a statement that represented the scholarship, activism, and lives of Black women who felt left behind by the imperatives of the Civil Rights and women’s movements (Collins, 2002; Taylor, 2017). Named for military action led by Harriet Tubman in 1863 that freed over 750 enslaved Africans, the Combahee River Collective has since become a beacon for contemporary radical collectivities working together toward justice and social change.

Collectivities matter. The power of the collective is important for the research that we conduct, the ways that we write about “the word and the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987), and the methods that we use to study language, literature, literacies—and the lives of students, teachers, and society. Even when research in the teaching of English is not specifically radical or activist in scope, much of it is conducted with others. While traditions of research collaboration are nothing new in social science inquiry, what strikes us about today’s emerging collectives is their intentionality, the ways that solidarities are negotiated inside and outside of the collective, and their expressed commitments not only to conducting research together, but also to living, doing, and making meaning together.

This is not to say that collectivities in English teaching and research, or collaborative inquiry, are without their complexities. In the introduction of their notable edited volume, Vygotskian Perspectives on Literacy Research, Carol D. Lee and Peter Smagorinsky (2000) note the important shift from studying the individual to studying the material and cultural histories of social groups; at the same time, they warn scholars not to gloss over the tensions inherent in collective interaction. They conclude that “the idea of community . . . does not necessarily refer to a sense of harmony, but rather to a shared set of social practices and goals that become differentiated among subgroups” (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000, p. 5). In other words, collectivities are characterized by the inherent variability of human perspectives—they do not necessarily need to be unified in practice in order to be transformative.

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We highlight here three reasons to pay more attention to collectivities in research on literacy and the teaching of English. The first one is epistemological. The diversity of perspectives in educational collectivities has the potential to strengthen the validity and soundness of our scholarship. Drawing on theories of intersectionality developed by both the Combahee River Collective and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), Satya Mohanty (2018) discusses how multiple social identities and experiences, both within oneself and in relationship to others, are more than a descriptive feature of our shared world or a demographic reality. They are also, importantly, profound epistemic resources that enhance our capacities to analyze the social world and unveil and explain dominant practices (including in the field of literacy and language education) that produce inequities. Collectivities thus have the potential advantage of bringing more experiences, angles of vision, and subordinated intellectual legacies to bear on educational phenomena. This is especially important because colonial histories are so deeply entrenched in schools that distorted deficit ideologies of students continue to be naturalized in policies such as ability tracking, English Only initiatives, and Eurocentric reading curricula. We have a better chance of conceptualizing alternative educational arrangements through the multiplicity of perspectives and worldviews that collectivities provide.

A second, related promise of collectivities is ethical. In the process of researching, learning, and teaching alongside others, we cultivate our abilities to nurture interdependence and values such as care and reciprocity. The education system is built largely around notions of competition and meritocracy, which too often ignore systemic inequalities. Through collaborative intellectual labor, researchers, educators, youth, and community members alike can collectively embody, beyond rhetoric, forms of sociality that privilege everyone’s well-being and flourishing.

Finally, understanding collectivities is necessary for any theory of change. All great social movements have been fueled by everyday people cooperating in ways that a focus on individual leaders, as Ella Baker reminds us, obscures. We believe the same is true in the field of education. Scholars increasingly are encouraged to “package” their ideas, develop their academic “brands,” and make an “impact.” But some of the most impactful and innovative educational work is not always documented in our academic journals or university webpages. It is rather the result of a range of people coming together locally in communities of inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) as part of collective projects for educational change and justice.

In this issue, we invited members of three self-described collectives—the Black Girls’ Literacies Collective (BGLC), the American Indian College Fund’s Tribal College and University (TCU) early childhood education initiatives, and the National Writing Project (NWP)—to comment on contemporary collective action in reading, literacy, and English education. We are inspired by the BGLC’s expressed commitment to the liberation of Black girls and women by “bringing to the forefront research and practice that call out and work against educational harm toward Black women and girls, while simultaneously promoting their social and academic success.” We are heartened by the NWP’s solidarity with overburdened educators in an era of standardization and neoliberal reform as expressed through
the spirit of the invitation: “An NWP invitation is an open request to participate, to marshall expertise for the collective. The opposite of an invitation is the mandates that plague the profession: mandated inservice, curricula, or assessments. We work to avoid contexts where participants are unable, as Kittle (2014) says, ‘to chart [their] own paths.’” And we are buoyed by the purposes and processes by which the American Indian College Fund’s TCU early childhood education initiatives “move from concept to actualization” through the “collective work within TCUs and tribal communities, as well as across TCUs and tribal communities”—in short, a collective of collectives. In all three of this issue’s In Dialogue essays, we find much to inform our own work together as a new editorial collective. We trust that others will be similarly enlightened.

All the articles in this issue illustrate how cutting-edge scholarship often grows out of collective and cooperative work committed to equity and human liberation. “Where Do We Go from Here? Toward a Critical Race English Education” makes this link most explicitly. Lamar L. Johnson employs autoethnography, including an account of his own journey to Ferguson, Missouri, to situate the emerging framework of critical race English education (CREE) within #BlackLivesMatter, as well as within collective conversations in the field of English education (Baker-Bell, Butler, & Johnson, 2017). In doing so, Johnson argues for English and literacy curricula that address anti-Black racism and white supremacy, imagining “classrooms where the teachers and students all have riots in their souls (Baszile, 2006) and are not afraid to join the revolution in a time of racial chaos by making a commitment to racial justice—a commitment to their cause, our cause, and the cause of human freedom.” Throughout the article, Johnson pays homage to both individual scholar-activists and previous anti-oppressive social and educational efforts that have paved the way for CREE, both within the United States and globally. These past movements include, for example, slave uprisings, women’s suffrage, the Black Arts Movement, the Black Freedom Movement, women’s rights, the Civil Rights Movement, and LGBTQ movements. What makes CREE a promising contemporary intervention into English education is that, not unlike the broader Movement for Black Lives, it acknowledges intersectionality, such as the multiplicity of sexual and gendered identities of everyone involved, as a strength of the collective educational and activist literacy scholarship directed unflinchingly toward racial justice.

In “‘What If We Were Committed to Giving Every Individual the Services and Opportunities They Need?’ Teacher Educators’ Understandings, Perspectives, and Practices Surrounding Dyslexia,” Jo Worthy, Catherine Lammert, Cori Salmerón, Stacia Long, and Vickie Godfrey employ Bakhtin’s concepts of authoritative and internally persuasive discourses to examine the fraught and highly contested area of dyslexia. The interview study of teacher educators surfaces a range of nuanced and complex perspectives of dyslexia that challenge the “network of intricately connected organizations” that dictates state policy in Texas and elsewhere. This network, informed primarily by research done in the “Psy-fields” (Emanuele, 2002, as cited in Friedrich, 2014), ignores critical sociocultural understandings of literacy as well as the viewpoints of educators themselves. While the interviews do
not necessarily reveal a new emerging consensus or alternative understanding of dyslexia, what is clear is that teacher educators are finding it increasingly untenable to subscribe to medical models and other deficit ideologies, such as essentialized notions of intelligence (Kliewer, Biklen, & Petersen, 2015), that narrowly locate disability in the minds of individual learners. This is perhaps because the broader interdisciplinary field of disability studies, itself an outgrowth of the disability rights movement, is no longer on the margins of academia but rather has fully emerged (Garland-Thomson, 2013), influencing teaching, learning, and educational research as well. The authors themselves draw on disability critical race studies to highlight teacher educators’ attention to inequities related to race and class in the labeling and instruction of students.

In this issue’s third article, “Portal and Gatekeeper: How Peer Feedback Functions in a High School Writing Class,” Valerie L. Marsh explores how generative, socially driven, and collaborative writing practices that are often found in online spaces can be incorporated into classrooms. Marsh expands Gee’s (2004) influential notion of affinity spaces, where people come together around shared passions to build and share knowledge collaboratively across varying levels of expertise, to more formal educational spaces. Such an expansion involves significant work by Marsh to consider how inherent power imbalances in classrooms make it challenging to create spaces for distributed expertise, shared passion, porous leadership, and collaborative inquiry—all hallmarks of online affinity spaces—to flourish there. Marsh describes how one classroom, a creative writing elective for high school students at different grade levels, shared features of online affinity spaces, particularly as students reviewed each other’s work. Marsh makes a powerful argument about the affordances of peer feedback in ELA classrooms that reimagine those practices to incorporate a “new literacies ethos” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011)—that is, to serve as a portal to more equitable participatory practices that feature collaboration and shared knowledge. Just as peer feedback can operate as a portal in classrooms, however, Marsh cautions that the practice can also function as a gatekeeper that maintains more traditional, hierarchical structures of knowledge production. Marsh’s efforts to imagine classroom affinity spaces offer an exciting direction for educators and researchers to look for other “portals” that open up classroom spaces to new configurations, draw on the power of collaborative practice, and contribute to more equitable outcomes for youth.

In a time of increasing precarity for so many, we think the lessons learned from collectives inside and outside of education can be generative for educators who are committed to working toward justice and transformation.

REFERENCES


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