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Editors’ Introduction

Toward Methodological Pluralism: The Geopolitics of Knowing

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Research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions.
—Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 5

Geo-politics of knowledge goes hand in hand with geo-politics of knowing. Who and when, why and where is knowledge generated (rather than produced, like cars or cell phones)?
—Walter Mignolo, 2009, p. 160

We begin our editorial introduction with two quotes: one from Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith and the other from Argentinian semiotician Walter Mignolo. In the months since we began our editorial efforts, we have been struck by how often questions of methodology emerge in our team dialogues, in the journal’s external reviews, and in conversations with our colleagues across disciplines. Both Smith and Mignolo raise questions about methodology that we think are crucial for English educators and literacy researchers to consider, such as how we come to know in our work, and how these ways of knowing are shaped by the histories and legacies of different forms of research, beliefs about knowledge and experience, and systems of oppression.

In her groundbreaking book, Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples, Smith traces how scientific knowledge production has historically exploited indigenous peoples and questioned their epistemological legitimacy; in response to this history, she challenges contemporary researchers to take an activist, anti-colonial, anti-oppressive stance in their methodologies. In the quote above, Smith emphasizes that we must remember that all research has real stakes and is situated in broader political and social contexts—no research decision is neutral or passive. Like Smith, Mignolo has worked to theorize decolonial methodologies in ways that involve both a reckoning with histories of racist, colonial, and “euro-centered” epistemologies (p. 160) and a fundamental reordering of the questions researchers ask to make central people’s autonomy to define themselves and their humanity on their own terms. Mignolo draws attention to the geopolitics of knowledge generation, arguing that what has too often been represented as “universal” is in fact a colonial perspective. As Mignolo points out, drawing on Castro-Gómez
(2007, as cited in Mignolo, 2009), there is no “zero” or Archimedean point from which to analyze the world—we are all theorizing from particular social locations with their own entangled histories and relationships of power.

As we continue our ongoing conversations on methodologies employed in our field, we think it is vital for researchers to make visible the histories, stakes, and geopolitical dynamics in their writing. Such a commitment to self-reflexivity in the research process involves more than being transparent about the mechanics of a research study (e.g., reporting the number and kinds of interviews conducted or including details about the schools and individuals who participated); rather, it requires considering the researchers’ stance and relationships to others in the study, the conceptual and epistemological foundations of their work, the coherence between the conceptual foundations and the methods, and recognition of what is at stake and for whom. Addressing research as situated and never neutral necessitates grappling with issues of power—among researchers and “participants,” for example, as well as historically conditioned power inequities produced by racism, misogyny, ableism, colonization, and other forms of intersectional oppression.

We recognize that for many years, researchers studying literacy teaching and learning have forwarded approaches to address the issues we outline above. We are encouraged by efforts to engage in research that recognizes its sociopolitical dimensions and histories, whether via decolonial (e.g., Bhattacharya, 2016; Cushman, 2011) and humanizing approaches (e.g., Freire, 1970; Paris & Winn, 2014), feminist and Black feminist methods (e.g., Dillard, 2000; Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003), or activist approaches like participatory action and youth participatory action research (e.g., Mirra, García, & Morrell, 2015). Recent moves to engage in postqualitative and poststructuralist approaches to literacy research that eschew traditional qualitative methods altogether represent further efforts to upend historically conditioned epistemologies for how we come to know (e.g., Taguchi & St. Pierre, 2017). Methodological experimentation and innovation are required to help investigate the shifting policy and sociopolitical contexts of education, as well as more expansive views of literacy research, practice, and what counts as a text in English language arts. We believe that there are multiple locations of knowledge generation and that all research paradigms have a place in contributing to understanding issues at the heart of English education and literacy teaching and learning.

We think it remains important, especially in light of methodological experimentation, to be attentive to rigor. Certainly, varied epistemologies shape conceptions of rigor, with critiques leveled at any methodological paradigm—participatory or collaborative research can be deemed to lack “objectivity,” case studies to lack “generalizability,” and statistical methods to ignore social context or how researchers’ positionalities shape findings. However, we believe that efforts toward research transparency and pluralism require researchers to make a detailed case for how their methodological choices have been conceived and employed, articulating the affordances and limitations of their vantage points for broadening scholarly inquiry and contributing to existing knowledge.
The current issue of RTE centers these methodological concerns in the In Dialogue section, with essays by Leigh Patel, Peter Smagorinsky, and Ezekiel Dixon-Román that productively grapple with critical issues facing contemporary scholars of literacy and English education. While all three authors are currently working from US institutions, they have each engaged in transnational scholarship and represent a range of distinct but overlapping conceptual locations. Both Patel and Dixon-Román question the sociopolitical histories of knowledge generation in the academy. Patel examines how qualitative research can reproduce quantitative logics and hierarchical power relationships, while Dixon-Román considers how colonial legacies “haunt” contemporary methods and obscure the embodied and material ways researchers come to know. Smagorinsky, building on his influential article (2008) about the importance of the Methods section in social science writing, pushes researchers toward conceptual coherence in their methodological approaches, specifically in how they warrant their claims and evidence in relation to those conceptual frameworks.

The feature articles in the issue further contribute to our thinking about how we “come to know” in educational research. Blaine E. Smith employs multimodal methods of data collection and analysis in her study of composing practices in a multilingual secondary classroom. Smith argues that students’ uses of multiple modes mediated their literary interpretations, helping them to forge multilevel connections to literature and to clarify, organize, and extend their ideas both individually and collaboratively. Tisha Lewis Ellison and Marva Solomon also draw on multimodal forms of data collection and analysis as they look across two ethnographic studies investigating the digital practices of African American children and families. In centering African American parents’ and children’s counter-storytelling practices, Ellison and Solomon challenge deficit frameworks often invoked in discourse around digital literacies, race, and access, and they advocate moving beyond simplistic notions of the “digital divide.” Finally, Erika Moore Johnson examines the reading scaffolds provided by two teachers working with emergent bilingual learners through a comparative case study methodology. She brings together conceptual frames that view students as meaning-makers who draw on their translanguage repertoires with scholarship on the role of teachers’ scaffolding in the literacy learning of emergent bilinguals. Her co-articulation of these varied theoretical territories provides an opening to deepen understandings of how methods of reading instruction might be leveraged to cultivate supportive and intellectually rigorous learning opportunities.

Questions of methodological pluralism have import for research in the teaching of English, as well as for schooling and society as we near the end of this decade and look toward the next. At a time when the sociopolitical ground is shifting beneath our feet, examining the geopolitics of knowing is more critical than ever.
REFERENCES


