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Editors’ Introduction

Ethics and Literacy Research

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Studying is not limited to the university. It’s not held or contained within the university. Study has a relation to the university, but only insofar as the university is not necessarily excluded from the undercommons that it tries so hard to exclude.

—Fred Moten (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 113)

As we close our first volume year, we would like to first and foremost express our gratitude to our reviewers and editorial board members, who have taken time out of their busy lives to give thoughtful feedback on manuscripts submitted to Research in the Teaching of English. Reviewing is one of the least visible and most selfless services in academia, yet it plays an invaluable dialogical and pedagogical role in pushing our collective work in the field. We would also like to thank everyone who has submitted their work to RTE. We are heartened by the robust intellectual diversity of the pieces we have received, as well as the genuine commitment of so many literacy and ELA scholars to equity and increasing the educational opportunities of students across the life span.

This commitment is exemplified in this issue’s research articles, which all work to understand research problems in ways that benefit their participants while considering more fully the humanity of the people discussed in their work. Vaughn W. M. Watson and Alecia Beymer examine the multiple literacies youth of color engage in their songwriting about the city where they live, Detroit, to call attention to how youth reorient deficitizing narratives to focus on the strengths of their communities. They develop the idea of “praisesongs of place” to understand the critical work youth do through their multimodal composing to “build new conceptualizations of futures of their city” and to assert their roles as leaders in shaping those futures. By inquiring into students’ memorable writing experiences at the college level, Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner reaffirm the importance of personal connection in writing projects across disciplines. They find that facilitating opportunities for students to link their interests and experiences to writing is a “key factor for developing and sustaining student agency and identity in higher education.” Danielle Lillge investigates the experience of English teachers participating in and implementing learning from professional
development (PD) programs focused on disciplinary literacy. Lillge emphasizes the struggle many teachers have in processing the often-conflicting paradigms extolled in PD sessions and suggests “rethinking PD design and facilitation in ways that resist the urge to oversimplify teachers’ learning needs and application efforts.” Finally, Kimberly Lenters utilizes critical posthuman and postqualitative theories to story the complex composing of children in a fifth-grade classroom. Directly engaging ethics, Lenters argues that “by opening up language arts (and social studies, math, science, etc.) to provide space for frequent ethical encounters, classroom pedagogy can, over time, foster collective agentful practices that are positive affirmations of life.”

The end of our inaugural volume is also a time for self-reflection, especially during this period of political and social contestation. In this issue, we invite initial conversations about the role that higher education and literacy research may play as a form of civic engagement. The university’s responsibility to collaborate with the broader public, including with schools and community-based organizations, has received renewed attention in educational scholarship (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). Research-practice partnerships highlight the promise of universities leveraging their resources and expertise to help address public interests, with communities, in turn, providing on-the-ground opportunities for research and practice. These partnerships have proven epistemologically and methodologically fruitful as they have engendered, facilitated, and complicated our understanding of new literacies and technologies. No longer merely transmitting their conclusions for practitioners to execute with “fidelity,” many literacy researchers instead negotiate their own positions in relation to, and in dialogue with, the communities with which they are engaged. It is in this spirit that we conceived the theme of this issue’s In Dialogue, “Ethics in Literacy Research beyond the Institutional Review Boards,” which calls for literacy researchers’ self-reflection on what it means to conduct equity-oriented research alongside—rather than merely on—schools, teachers, communities, youth, and families.

The theme is premised on the idea that partnerships are not an answer, but rather a starting point for inquiry into ethical considerations of literacy research. One of the most salient challenges in such collaborations has been the power differentials between (and within) universities and communities, which are often exacerbated when working with people, schools, and organizations whose knowledge has historically been devalued. As universities are committed to expanding civic impact beyond their historically elite and hermetic borders (e.g., Cantor & Lavine, 2006), there are increased demands on them to acknowledge their own implication in legacies of oppression. Some colleges and universities are seeking to better address and redress the erosion of trust caused, for example, by their involvement in exploitative research agendas, gentrification, and toxic campus climates. In response to such enterprises, a growing number of community organizations, taking their cues from the Disability Rights Movement, demand that there be “Nothing about us without us” and “We are our own best advocates” (Rusoja, 2017). In schools, teacher research and action networks are creating spaces for practitioners to take the lead on learning, leadership, and knowledge generation initiatives.
This is not to suggest that university-based literacy and ELA researchers do not or cannot engage in important work alongside schools and communities, or that there are any ideologically “pure” locations from which to conduct inquiry, for that matter. What is becoming increasingly clear is that ethical considerations in educational and literacy research go beyond IRB protocols, and that there is need for research partnerships to reflexively attend to the ethical and professional norms that guide their work. These norms might include, for example, a presumption of radical equality, taking the stance that everyone with whom researchers partner might be considered intellectuals, cultural theorists, artists, organizers, and educators whose perspectives should be taken seriously (Campano, Ghiso, & Welch, 2015).

We designed this issue’s In Dialogue as a means to put into conversation university-based researchers who have explored, in their empirical work, ethical considerations in literacy and language research across a range of contexts. Focusing on studies done with LGBTQ youth, Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth and Caitlin L. Ryan argue that designations of risk, developed to protect children in research, may inadvertently cause harm by prohibiting queer topics that are often labeled too “risky” for children to engage. They explain that “if the marker of risk is ‘how people in society might react if they knew,’ then suggesting there is risk in investigating queer topics might acknowledge the material, real-life consequences of homophobia on one hand, but also makes risk stand in as a co-marker of stigma vis-à-vis normative perspectives, further marginalizing diverse people’s identities and experiences on the other.” Timothy San Pedro critiques the idea that member-checking alone is sufficient to ensure research is presented ethically. Instead, San Pedro proposes humanizing research that “center[s] the multiple truths shared between people” and whose findings evolve dialogically between all participants, including researchers. Moving into the virtual realm, Jen Scott Curwood reflects on what is both novel and familiar about research issues in online and digitally mediated spaces. To frame concerns and possible resolutions for a field that might seem completely new and without clear ethical guidelines, Curwood reminds us of the people that shape digital spaces, what their rights are as research participants, and the necessity “to ask ourselves: Where is the humanity in online human subjects research?”

The type of self-reflexivity demonstrated by our In Dialogue contributors may be considered a necessary step in nurturing an undercommons (Harney & Moten, 2013) in academia, alternative forms of relation and sociality that open up spaces for nondominant intellectual traditions. Two rich examples are, in fact, the scholarship of this year’s Alan C. Purves Award honorees, Latrise P. Johnson, Cati V. de los Ríos, and Kate Seltzer. As described by Purves committee members María Paula Ghiso, Rob Simon, and Cristina Guerrero, these two award-winning articles, judged as likely to have the greatest impact on practice, illustrate how researchers can enact relational and responsive methodologies to support transformative pedagogies that honor the knowledges and experiences of students. Their work researching alongside and in partnership with educators and schools underscores that not only is a new world possible—one where ethical considerations and col-
laboration are foregrounded in academic research—but such intellectual worlds have already emerged and can continue to thrive.

REFERENCES


