

Integrative Research Review

Mapping the Challenges and Changes to Literacy Research

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Literacy is an important aspect of society and it is therefore not surprising that how it is defined, researched, measured and supported is often fiercely contested.

With respect to research (e.g., the merits of evidence, matters of the legitimacy of research design, and the justifiability of findings), there have been major tensions, which at times have divided the research community. Despite such contestations, the literacy research community currently seems (to me) more inclusive than exclusive, more accommodating of its membership's differences, and less concerned about being assimilative. By challenging its own lack of diversity, the community has been able to delve into the coalface of pressing issues—including issues of poverty and discrimination and the politics of exclusion and privilege in our practices, policies, and community mores. It is a community that appears to be again embracing a diversity of ideas and epistemologies — a site for discussions, conversations and challenges in conjunction with a reflexive and responsive exploration of theories and research that will make a difference.

A Literacy Researcher Looks/Looking Back

My engagement in the literacy research community began in the early 1970s with my graduate studies in reading education at the University of Georgia. Prior to that time, I had been a teacher in Australia for some years and struggled with meeting the needs of my students—a mix of recent immigrants and multi-generational Australians. In the seventies, the reading field in the U.S. was dominated by influences that stemmed from W. S. Gray and his curriculum model (Gray, 1960). The U.S. was dealing with the aftermath of the First Grade Studies (Bond and Dykstra, 1967) and the Great Debate (Chall, 1967); eclecticism and recognition of the vital role of the teacher seemed to replace concern over whether phonics was taught synthetically or analytically. Reading research was a site that went beyond looking for the best method of teaching of reading as theory development became a focus and other developments occurred. These new fronts included:

- Psycholinguistics, especially the perspectives of Frank Smith (1971) and Ken Goodman (1967) and based in part on Ken Goodman's miscue work and the work in the area of language acquisition;
- Advances in teaching reading comprehension, especially tied to David Russell (1956) and Russell Stauffer's reading as a thinking process (1969), and to the work of Harold Herber (1978) and his colleagues at Syracuse in the area of content area reading strategies;

- The nature and development of critical reading (Willavene Wolf, Charlotte Huck, & Martha King, 1967), critical thinking (Robert Ennis, 1981; John McPeck, 1981) and moral reasoning (Laurence Kohlberg, 1973);
- The significance of early literacy experiences (Durkin, 1966) and oral and written language development including the reading-writing relationships (Loban, 1976);
- Understandings and directions for further work suggested by the extraordinary syntheses of the literature of research on reading carried out by a network of leading scholars from various disciplines and represented in the volume edited by Martin Kling and Frederick Davis (1971), entitled “The Literature of Research on Reading with an Emphasis on Models,” and the volume edited by Harry Singer and Robert Ruddell (1970), now in its sixth edition as *Theoretical and Processes of Reading* (Alvermann, Unrau and Ruddell, 2014).

As a University of Georgia graduate student, I had teaching and research assistantships in the reading education library, teaching introductory undergraduate courses in the teaching of reading, and undertaking statistical analyses for countless research studies conducted by faculty and graduate students. Statistical analyses involving Analyses of Variance, Multiple Analyses of Variance, and Multiple Regression were pervasive at that time.

My own interests at the time focused on meaning-making, creativity and literacy, and critical reading. I was also intrigued with the problems with measuring reading comprehension and critical reading and was keen to delve into teaching behaviors, especially the role and nature of teacher questioning following Frank Guszak’s observations of the limited repertoire enlisted by classroom teachers (Guszak, 1967).

My journey as a researcher over time moved forward most dramatically in the company of a host of supportive intellectual communities. These ranged from what might be considered a traditional reading educator group to socio-psycholinguistic based networks such as the Center for the Expansion of Language and Thinking to schema-theory based researchers anchored at the University of Illinois to writing research groups in New Hampshire and Pittsburgh, critical theorists and postcolonial groups challenging epistemologies working across borders and with indigenous communities. Challenge and change stemmed from interrogating ideas and theory via conversations, collaborations, and emerging friendships with colleagues having similar passions and a belief that we could make a difference.

Research meetings, especially NRC and now LRA, have been integral to making these connections and spurring my conversations. Over time such meetings served as forms of mile markers, rest stops, or launching pads for this ongoing journey—opportunities to share and get feedback, to plan new initiatives. And, in the nineties, given the political climate, meetings were akin to a weather channel to discuss developments in the field or looming storms.

Typically literacy researchers have strong passions, intrepid commitments, and supportive and collaborative demeanors befitting the tough questions and vexing problems that they and their teams are addressing. In my view, they often share a passion for literacy in its many manifested forms at the intersection of language and thought, society, and culture; a commitment to meeting the literacy development needs of individuals and society; and a keenness to be part of a quest to understand the nature of literacy through dialogue and various research endeavors. And, as they see

inquiry as the means for doing so, they increasingly give voice to the historically silenced; make visible the hidden, subsumed, or overlooked; raise our consciousness; provoke and support changes in thinking, behavior and actions; and our roles — especially our ethics.

As a result of these passions and commitments, key theoretical insights and understandings are moving forward. Let me illustrate across a subset of topics some of the key issues and developments in our field; to do this I enlist presidential addresses and keynotes from past conferences as the primary sources, as I believe these talks are weather vanes for developments in the field.

Models of Literacy—Reading Behavior

Perhaps the dominant theme in literacy research has been quests to refine our understandings of reading and, nowadays, literacy. The resulting shifts over time are stunning. Forty years ago this was an organization that was predominately middle-aged white male education professors from largely southeastern universities who focused on college reading. Consistent with syntheses of the field and publications at the time, most of the membership aspired to pursue somewhat detached laboratory-based reading research akin to the work of lab-based psychologists with positivist leanings enlisting experimental and quasi-experimental paradigms to proffer objectified findings and promise conclusions generalizable to the populations sampled that had been sampled. These laboratory-like studies of reading predominately focused upon “inside-the-head” processes tied to word and sentence recognition. If social dimensions were considered, then they were treated as fixed independent variables. The tools being suggested were largely intended to monitor what was occurring “inside the head” or to measure achievement outcomes and, as Edward Fry stated in his Presidential address, to do “statistical significance testing versus sociological analyses.” Accordingly, the tools were consistent with an interest in what are reliably quantifiable measures of reading. Today such a singular view would be contested as interests, foci, ontologies, and epistemologies have shifted to embrace socio-cultural-political elements as integral to and intermeshed with rather than detached from reading.

Interactional Models

In the late seventies, our journey expanded from laboratory studies of reading behavior to studies of literacy in the real world or classroom. Beginning with the cognitive revolution, these developments paralleled those of the history of ideas in the last century, which moved from predominantly behavioristic accounts of behavior to constructivist views of learning (see Rankin, 1973) with antecedents to the earlier work of Bartlett (1932) which had largely gone unrecognized for almost 50 years. One of the most significant shifts occurred in the late seventies when interdisciplinary interest in research in reading comprehension experienced a zeitgeist in terms of interests, focus and orientation. A combination of psycholinguistic and cognitive views of the mind together with a shift toward unpacking discourse processing of extended texts contributed significantly to changes in what was researched, the tools that were enlisted, and in our conceptualizations of reading. With presentations at NRC by schema theorists, text linguists, psycholinguists and others (including Richard Anderson, Walter Kintsch, Bonnie Meyer, Bertram Bruce, Allen Collins, Carl Frederiksen, David Rumelhart, Rand Spiro, Andrew Ortony, Diane Schallert, William Brewer, Nancy Stein), we experienced and partnered in the cognitive and

linguistic shift—a weaving together of psycholinguistics, schema theory, and studies of reading comprehension of extended text utilizing research tools (e.g. retellings, text analyses, and think-alouds) that address reader-text interactions and, later, author-reader-text transactions. Researchers sought to unravel the nature and role of readers' background knowledge and meaning-making processes (e.g. selecting and connecting ideas, imaging, reader purposes, reader perspectives) and to investigate the role of text features and mathemagenic functions of adjuncts as readers engaged with text narratives and exposition. These developments coincided with discussions in literary theory with the rise of interest in reader-response theory (Holland, 1965, Fish, 1980, Bleich, 1975, 1978; Purves & Beach, 1975; Rosenblatt, 1969, Tompkins, 1980) based upon case studies of readers and with antecedents to the earlier work of I.A. Richards (1930).

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The magnitude and significance of these developments should not be understated. Research on reading comprehension dominated educational research meetings and conceptualizations of meaning making were revised in accordance with some of the key understandings being derived. Schema-based interactive models of meaning making informed curriculum at all levels and across all disciplines as more and more teachers and curriculum developers were rethinking the nature of reading comprehension and learning.

Classroom Studies, Studies of Learning to Learn, Studies of Teachers

In the 80s, on the heels of a call by Harry Singer (see Presidential address) for research in classrooms, a number of other developments contributed to a ground swell of activity, especially focused upon reading comprehension instruction. A key example was an influential study by Dolores Durkin (1978-79) lamenting the lack of reading comprehension in schools and the advent of metacognitive views of learning to learn (e.g., Brown, 1987). The end result was classroom-based research and studies of learners received a significant stimulus—including calls for complex and rich classroom-based comparisons, instructional experiments focused on learning to learn, and time-series, case studies, and longitudinal investigations of the effects of interventions upon readers' and writers' use of strategies for learning. This work was quick to build upon ongoing and new research, such as content area reading strategies (e.g. Harold Herber, Anthony Manzo, Michael Pressley); instructional research by Pearson and colleagues based upon schema-theoretic notions of reading; research on text structure and studies of genre by Nancy Stein, Bonnie Meyer, Bonnie Armbruster and Tom Anderson, Bertram Bruce and Andee Rubin, Michael Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan; and studies of language development including literacy acquisition by Elizabeth Sulzby and William Teale, Jerome Harste and Carolyn Burke, Yetta Goodman, Martha King, Vic Rentel, Chris Pappas, Barbara Pettegrew, Elfrieda Hiebert, Emilia Ferriera, David Yaden, Susan Newman and Anne Haas Dyson.

Attention to teachers and teacher education added to the momentum and interest in teaching reading comprehension and literacy development (see Presidential addresses by James Hoffman and Gerry Duffy). In the nineties, it became further heightened in response to growing tensions around what teachers were expected to do by legislated policy. This shift was marked by the Presidential addresses (e.g., P. David Pearson, Jerome Harste, Trika Smith-Burke, James Hoffman and Gerry Duffy) as well as invited addresses by scholars interested in self-regulated learning cognition and engagement (e.g., Ann Brown, Joseph Campione, John Seely-Brown, Scott Paris, John Guthrie, Patricia Alexander). These developments naturally became intertwined with calls

for teacher collaborations and teacher researcher work, complex site-based studies of practice, and encouragement to researchers to remain focused upon pursuits directed at literacy needs of individuals and groups (e.g. Jane Hansen, Rebecca Barr, Taffy Raphael, Linda Gambrell, Peter Mosenthal, Katherine Au, Kathleen Hinchman, Victoria Purcell-Gates). And, at the same time, major professional development initiatives were being initiated to meet the needs of “at-risk” students (e.g., Reading Recovery—Marie Clay, Gay Su Pinnell, Diane DeFord, Carol Lyons); and Success for All (Robert Slavin).

Reading-Writing Process Models

Developments in writing research added yet another major shift to our conceptualizing of literacy as well as a seismic shift in curriculum, especially for young children. The findings emerging from early reading and writing research as well as research on writing processes, authorship, and reading-writing relationships prompted major shifts in our models of reading, curriculum, teaching, and testing practices. For example, the work of Anne Haas Dyson, Anthony Petrosky, Donald Graves, Janet Emig, Louise Rosenblatt, John Hayes, Linda Flower, Cathy Short, Deborah Rowe, Marjorie Seigel, John Austin, and Charles Peirce served as major catalysts to shifts to reading and writing together rather than as isolated from one another. The weaving together of reading and writing into models of meaning making also prompted our integration of literary and socio-semiotic theoretic perspectives as well as the articulation of reading as a composing processes (Tierney and Pearson, 1983; Spivey, 1984) .

The developments were important precursors to a shift in the organization from a “reading” research organization to a “literacy” research and opened the door for a broadening of perspectives, epistemological turns in terms of our research. They also dovetailed with the momentum that was gathering around a shift from “inside the head” to “outside the head” conceptualizations of reading as well as studies of meaning making across multiple texts in everyday life and enhanced by the Internet.

In terms of classroom practice, these frameworks were responsible for what may have been some of the most substantial developments in classroom practice, a rebirth of the teacher-researcher, and a scholarship of teaching with a reach to other teachers via a surge in books written for and by teachers, sometimes in collaboration with researchers.

Changing Text Worlds—Digital Literacies

In the late eighties and early nineties, our text worlds were beginning to be altered in ways that eventually catapulted us forward beginning with the advent of digital engagements, especially Hypertext Mark Up Language (HTML), the unfolding of the internet, networking, and other digital advances—changing how we process language, transact with ourselves, communities, ideas, and society. These developments spurred the shift from a receptive model of reading processes to a productive model of multiple literacies and collective meaning making. We became less print-centric as image and text became fused and digital developments foreshadowed dynamic formats for linked synchronized and asynchronized multilayered mixes of words, images, sounds, resources, and exchanges which were handheld, portable, or desktop as well as wireless and networked globally or locally (e.g. James Gee, Charles Kinzer, Julia Coiro, David Reinking, Richard Beach, James Flood and Diane Lapp). As Julie Coiro, Michele Knobel, Colin Lankshear, and Donald J. Leu (2008)

note, literacy is no longer a static construct from the standpoint of its defining technology for the past 500 years; it has now come to mean a rapid and continuous process of change in the ways in which we read, write, view, listen, compose, and communicate information” (p. 5). Or, as they clarify, although recognizing that literacies shift and develop over ages, the speed and scale of change at this time are unparalleled. As stated in another paper (Tierney, 2011) :

...On the positive side...this layering and linkages may expedite both the multiplier effects of making meaning across a library of images, words and sounds interwoven in ways that call for the integration of multiple sources and making of intertextual connections across textual spaces including the multimedia elements that are mixed together in ways that creates complex compounds of meanings and active agents for transmediation...the power of criss-crossing multi-layering renditions of ideas in the education of medical practitioners and teachers in ways that afford understandings that are more generative and flexible especially when they fashioned as case based knowledge (Spiro, R. J., Collins, B. P. Thota, J. J., & Feltovich, P. J., 2003) .

...On the negative side, as researchers have predicted and found, such meaning making is not always trouble free as one moves from one site to another and across layers. Indeed, with hypertext, depending upon the experiences of the meaning makers, learning may be constrained by a kind of labyrinth. (Tierney, 2011).

In 1994, James Flood, in his Presidential address, made a plea for studies of visual literacy in a world bombarded by visual media, especially with the advent of digital technologies. In 2005, Donald Leu, in his Presidential address reflected upon the advent of digital literacies and argued “...you cannot study reading or literacy without studying technology. To think otherwise is not to understand the nature of reading, literacy, or technology.”p.2. In 2013, Richard Beach in his Presidential address, implored us to embrace the digital possibilities as we examine its nature and use in the present and the future for all including the research community. As he demonstrated at the conference, digital developments have the potential to spur our engagement as an organization with a broader audience in dynamic ways—both locally and globally.

Sociocultural Turn

These aforementioned major shifts and developments, culminated in, coincided with, or were part of what has been described as the socio-cultural turn in literacy research (see O’Brien and Rogers, in press), involving the view that socio-cultural processes are not fixed or operating apart from literacy, but are integrated with and transacting with cognitive processes. Such a turn has occurred across thirty years or more beginning perhaps with Shirley Brice Heath’s work, including her 1985 keynote “Being Literate in America: A Socio-historical Perspective” which challenged reading researchers to examine the socio-linguistic barriers that are perpetuated by views and practices that reproduce an orientation to literacy that fails to build true bridges to modern day literacies and to further disenfranchise some individuals and groups. Moreover, she challenged us to shift our views of meaning making to encompass what had historically been treated as external variable—that is the social dimensions. In subsequent years, the work of Anne Haas Dyson, Judith Green, David Bloome, Victoria Purcell-Gates, and Brian Street has proven to be foundational

to reconceptualizing literacy but also to a broadening of what we studied, how, why, and with whom. Likewise, the work of communication theorists, the early literacy researchers, and keynote presentations by invitees to the conference such as Deborah Tannen and John Ogbu contributed to the momentum. The ramifications of these developments were immense, influencing how we viewed literacy—especially, the intertwining of social and the cognitive processes and recognition that context was a dependent variable intertwined with literacy. As Richard Beach, in his Presidential address, stated context itself is “not frozen” but “ever unfolding”.

Arguably, Anne Dyson’s work has been among the most influential in terms of facilitating this turn. Based upon her qualitative case studies of young learners in classrooms, Dyson (1993) has suggested that children’s major developmental challenge is not simply to create a unified text world but to move among multiple worlds and coordinate multiple space/time structures toward defining self, including how one is placed in the company of others. As Dyson (1993) stated, “children are not first and foremost learners; they are first and foremost people living the complexities of their day-to-day lives” (p. 36). Children seek to “imagine” relationships and situate themselves socioculturally and ideologically. In recent years, building upon the work of Dyson on collective meaning making, Henry Jenkins and his colleagues (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2008) have introduced the notion of participatory culture prompted, in part, in response to the advent of social meaning making emerging across literacy engagements within and across digital environments. As Jenkins et al. emphasize, “participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement through collaboration and networking.” P.4.

Ways of Knowing

The socio-cultural turn intertwined with the new wave of ways of knowing and frameworks for literacy research that dovetailed with more site-based research and the advent of post-positivism and critical theoretic approaches to research. These new perspectives address how, why, and what we research, our own and our participants’ subjectivity, issues of representation, evidence and claims, the ethics of our practice, and the nature of research collaborations.

Complementing these developments, the presidential addresses and keynotes delved into our epistemologies and subjectivity. The conference has been a site where the Presidents, past and present, use this address as a space to scrutinize literacy research practices as well as reflect upon the lenses that researchers use to gaze upon the world...from laboratory-based studies to real world of field work and classrooms, from positivism to constructivism to design-based experiments (e.g., David Reinking), from an absence of cultural consideration to cross-cultural examinations (e.g., Barr), and from colonialist to postcolonial critique. There has been a shift toward introspective examination of developments in how we should and could move forward, including our guiding metaphors and values that anchor the field (e.g., Jerome Harste, Peter Mosenthal, Deborah Dillon, Victoria Purcell-Gates, Norm Stahl, Pat Edwards).

In my presidential address entitled, “A Multifaceted View of Literacy: On Matters of Subjectivity, Knowledge Claims, the Art of Method and Ethics in Literacy Research,” I argued that post-positivism involved not only the use of qualitative tools, but also an approach to research that was more site-based and subjective, demanding participatory approaches rather than feigned objectivity. In Donna Alvermann’s presidential address, “Research the Literal: Of Muted Voices, Second Texts and Cultural Representations,” she argued “... in favor of scholarly writing that

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makes overt our histories, gender, beliefs, values, preferences, and cultural assumptions....to provide a fuller and richer written account of all that we study.” She quoted Sandra Harding’s (1987) argument that “we need to avoid the ‘objectivist’ stance that attempts to make the researcher’s cultural beliefs and practices invisible while simultaneously skewering the research objects’ beliefs and practices to the display board” (pp. 9-10).

Martha Rapp Ruddell (1999) expanded upon this discussion in her Presidential address exhorting us to embrace our differences and the possibilities that they offer. As she stated,

“...my goal is *not* a call for action to make our differences disappear, but to make our differences even more clearly visible, explicated, and understood. I think for us to continue to flourish as a literacy research community we must first, in our writing and in our conversations with one another, reveal the assumptions, principles, and theories that constitute our worldview, and thus, that guide and influence our work.” pp.10-11.

She argued,

“...our collective discourse serves us well when it both reflects and illumines our diverse world views. To confine our collective inquiry to one or two or three research paradigms is to close down the conversation and, ultimately, weaken us.” p.15.

The Critical Turn

Shifts in our ways of knowing gained significant momentum with the emergence of a post-colonial, feminist and critical stance in the early nineties. Keynotes by critical theorists and sociologists (e.g. Peter McLaren, Allen Luke, Madeline Grumet, Patrick Shannon) and scholars focusing on race, gender, language difference issues, and class issues (e.g. Arnetta Ball, Teresa McCarty, and the Presidential address by Gunderson, 2003) spurred the expansion of our definitions of literacy to encompass socio-political considerations and address the dynamics of identity and positioning in the cultural contexts of literacy. This includes examining who, why, what, and how our role as researchers plays out in our work. They afforded frameworks and lens for making visible that which was often overlooked or ignored (conveniently or not) in ways that would challenge our theories, research, and practices. This laid the foundation for studies of projects tied to community-based projects—forms of social activism and analyses of the larger cultural systems at play, including socio-political analyses of institutions, especially in terms of race, gender and other dimensions (Jimenez, 1997). It also contributed to the thinking behind major curriculum developments such as the work of Short, Harste and Burke (1998) and Luke, Matters, Barrett, and Land. (2000).

Policy, Politics, and Paradigm Wars

In 1996, Richard Allington, in his Presidential address, discussed what had been an occasional refrain—our disconnect from the reality of meeting the needs of the society including policy developments. As he stated:

We cannot simply bemoan the naiveté of the citizenry, media, legislators, boards members, or school administrators without asking hard questions about our own

work and its relevance to the condition of education today. I am reasonably sure that we have few good answers to many of the problems of public education—that few of us, for instance, have anything truly useful to say to the New York City, Dallas, Miami, or Detroit Boards of Education ... the 800 or so elementary schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District—given the real world constraints that other actors operate within. (1997, p.11).

Some would argue that the critical nature of most literacy researchers was more inward looking and academic, acquiescent and local, than concerned with confronting society at large or government policy makers or the media. In her 1986 Presidential address, Lenore Ringler argued that the media's response to *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (1985) signaled disdain by the U.S. media for academics and vice versa—reflecting a divide between the public and literacy researchers that should be addressed. This conversation mirrors the recent LRA list-serv discussions responding to an editorial reference to the cloistered fashion with which academics retreat from public engagements. (February 15, 2014 New York Times, <http://www.nytimesinthefirstyear.com/professors-we-need-you>).

Arguably, at the policy level, we may have been spectators rather than agents for change despite the gravity of what has occurred (e.g., the exposure of the political corruption that occurred with No Child Left Behind, the definition of what counts as research, the audits of teacher education, and the possible imposition of common core curriculum). It is as if we had isolated ourselves, indulging some of our colleagues who have supported such developments. Only in recent years have we recognized our potential complicity with these malfeasant developments. Depending upon a researcher's epistemological allegiances, scholarship might be credited or dismissed, ignored, or censored. Unfortunately, the organization has seemed more interested in the study of and critique rather than engagement with such matters—at least, historically. Seeking a different kind of response by literacy researchers (especially those involved in teacher education and the graduate preparation of literacy scholars), Norman Stahl in his Presidential address reminds us that we need to recognize that literacy education, including the preparation of teachers and doctoral students, is in the storm path of political winds of these times. As he stated, "NRC is the foremost research organization in the foremost field in pedagogy, it is our onus to tackle the toughest questions in the field" (p. 23). In terms of doctoral studies, he states, "The future of the doctorate poses just such a question. For the time being, the storm flags have been hoisted, but the hurricane has yet to arrive" (p. 23).

Global and Indigenous Developments

Literacies, especially digital literacies, by their very nature assume a global capacity and character. But, despite increased interest in socio-political and cultural dimensions, most literacy research seems restricted to a few western nations. On occasion, global issues and indigenous issues have appeared on the literacy research road map, it has been mostly tethered to or subsumed under a "northern" or "western" or U.S.-centric framework. The domination of western research seems palpable and its influence growing without regard for recognizing what indigenous scholar Linda Smith (1999, 2005) refers to as "the tricky ground" of working with and across cultures—in ways that are respectful of individuals and communities including the nature and role of local knowledge.

Rebecca Barr (1994) pointed to complexities of global differences in her presidential address. As she stated, the differences between countries is greater than the differences within countries, and

studies that afford comparisons offer a great deal despite the complexities inherent in working across sites with different histories, cultures, communities, policies and practices. As she stated:

...I am intrigued by comparative analyses and their possibilities. I am well aware of their butterfly-like quality—beautiful, complex, and illusive. But the comparisons help us see how the values and institutions of a society shape educational processes. (1994, p.12)

As literacy researchers, whether we engage globally, nationally, or locally, we need to shift from our tendency to impose our frames upon others and deconstruct ourselves so that we may serve as allies and advocates rather than acting as the “dominant other” shaping others in an outsider’s image. We should consider and study our own roles and positions as well as the potential impact of any effort. I would hope that we make a concerted effort to contend with rhetorical conventions and bodies of knowledge other than their own rather mistaken forms of self-righteous national narcissism. Our world is increasingly integrating global influences as we deal with the flow of externalizing developments. As the literacy research assumes more global authority, I would hope that it does so in a fashion that is ethically responsible in ways that support the legitimacy of the local over the intrusive arrogance of others.

FINAL COMMENTS

At the close of the 2013 Literacy Research Association conference, Arlette Willis, the incoming President of LRA, asked those of us on the closing panel to respond to this set of questions:

After multiple sessions that have addressed, challenged, and expanded the conference theme, how might literacy researchers re-imagine literacy reform as transformative in a nation with a complex and contested history of literacy frailties. What can we learn from the past (in your respective areas of expertise) and what directions/guidelines do you suggest for the future of literacy research?

I hope my paper offers at least a partial listing of some of the developments that have occurred and provides at least some prompts for moving forward. What seems most heartening to me is that we are transforming ourselves to address real world issues in an ethical and responsive fashion and adjusting our ways of inquiring to engage in action rather than talk. Increasingly we appear to be doing so in a fashion that is not manipulative and objectifying, but communal. There seems to be an interest in making a difference to the lives of individuals and groups and in working in partnership with these stakeholders.

Literacy research nowadays offers a plethora of investigations reflecting real world engagements across diverse (cultural, linguistic, economic) urban, suburban, and rural settings involving classrooms, families and agencies. These investigations are often carried out in a participatory fashion that seeks to address the quality of lives through literacy practices and goals. The frameworks for doing this work are increasingly sophisticated and the reporting is both provocative and critical.

The research seems more organic than manufactured, more community-based than commercialized; literacy researchers seem to be reclaiming constructive conversation and debate rather than vitriol and dismissive critiques. Our ethical deliberations suggest responsiveness to and respectfulness befitting an awareness of the past unfortunate colonizing or objectifying practices as

well as important re-reading of ourselves. As Patricia Edwards questioned in her Presidential address: “If your research findings are not used to improve the subjects’ quality of life, do you really consider that ethical?” (2007, p. 23). But as she suggested, it requires positioning yourself as an ally in ways that are developmentally supportive. In a similar vein, Kathleen Hinchman (2010) argued for a level of discernment that places educational needs ahead of research protocols. With reference to students with special needs, she argues for a level of agency and discernment on the part of researchers lest these students needs be the victims of “...indiscriminant programming that is unlikely to position young people favorably as citizens” (p. 12). Or, as Peter Mosenthal, in his 2001 Presidential address, argued:

“... Setting a research agenda should not begin with the precipitous plunge into a discipline in order to answer the questions: what is reading? and what are the conditions under which we can predict reading behavior? Rather, we need to consider first the questions: What should be the goal of reading? Who should benefit the most from a reading agenda? and how are these persons’ interests best served, at the individual, group, and societal level.” (2002, p. 13).

Research on literacy involves not just being able to enhance the ability of individuals and groups to respond to what one reads and writes but extends to socio-political-cultural considerations that include matters of governance and economics. There is recognition that literacy is not just a skill that one learns. Rather, being literate is a way of “being” or interacting with oneself and others. It may be supported by books or webpages, by print and images—but it involves taking up literacy to help solve life’s problems and enhance society and individual lives—not just being able to complete a task. Literacy is not just a matter of raising test performance, but accessing and addressing local and global issues that matter—poverty, shelter, nutrition, health and other aspects of well-being, including hope, possibility, imagination, respect and self and group determination.

Despite our challenges and history of contestation, it is impressive that we are where we are, especially the extent to which research has become participatory (i.e., responsive to engaging with communities with which we are privileged to partner or support); the range of well-informed frameworks and multifaceted methodologies, and the approaches to offering findings with an eye to verifiability and transferability rather than generalizability; our increased concern for sustainable impacts; and our reflexivity for what we are doing. Certainly we have challenges, but that is for the journey ahead.

This began with Pat and Jim Cunningham, extended to my colleagues at my first university position at the University of Arizona (especially Joe Vaughan, Patty Anders, Diane Schallert, Walter Ames, and Ken and Yetta Goodman), through my students and then lifelong friendships with a host of colleagues including most notably David Pearson, Jerry Harste, Dick Allington, Cecily O’Neill, Richard Beach, Judith Green, Don Graves, Patti Lather, Anthony Petrosky, Trika Smith-Burke, Theresa Rogers as well as my colleagues in Australia and New Zealand including Peter Freebody, Allan Luke, John Elkins, Trevor Cairney, Brian Cambourne, Jan Turbill, Peter Rousch, Judith Rivalland, Marie Clay, Lester Rigney, Graham Smith, Bob Morgan, and Linda Smith.

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