Complexity, Multiplicity, Timeliness, and Substantive Engagement

Methodologies for Researching the Teaching of the English Language Arts

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In the last decade, a series of handbooks, textbooks, and special issues of journals dedicated to exploring methodology and methods in the social sciences and education have been published (e.g., Bloome et al., 2008; Cresswell, 2007; Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Green, Camilli, & Ellmore, 2006; Heath & Street, 2008; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2004; Reinking & Bradley, 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Willis et al., 2008; Yin, 2003). These have provided both the neophyte and the experienced educational researcher with valuable introductions and advanced discussions of the multiple research traditions, perspectives, and tools. As Smagorinsky (this volume) notes, unlike previous generations today’s reading, writing, and literacy researchers are faced with a “virtually endless” array of approaches. The myriad approaches notwithstanding, discussion and debate of how to approach research on the teaching and learning of the English language arts continues to evolve. But where the emphasis had previously been on rigor and the enumeration of new approaches, methodologies, and methods, the current attention focuses on complexity, multiplicity, and substantive engagement with the epistemological and ontological construction of teaching and teachers, learning and learners, and language and literacy. These current foci are drawn from and implicit within the intricate learning experiences researchers are attempting to document. Teacher and student experiences and their questionable and contested learning outcomes compel researchers to ask complex questions that cannot be constrained by traditional quantitative and qualitative social science research models.

Evolving Toward Complexity, Multiplicity, and Substantive Engagement

A trend that can be noticed in recent methodological handbooks, texts, and journals is increasing emphasis on the use of multiple research traditions, perspectives, methodologies, and methods (Calfee & Chambliss, this volume). This direction is sometimes referred to as the use of complementary approaches (see Green et al., 2006) or the use of mixed methods (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). These two terms are not synonymous. The first refers to the principled construction of complementarities among differing perspectives about what counts as knowledge and how knowledge is generated. The second refers to the use of various methods (also described as tools and techniques), and how their use might be orchestrated within a particular research study or program of research. However, both directions share the initial focus on the learning contexts as the guiding principle for the research. The questions and methods are constructed to capture the experiences of English language arts classrooms, not to impose static research designs upon these sites and situations.

The chapters in this section reflect conversations concerning the trajectory of research in the field of English language arts and do not repeat what can be found in these handbooks, texts, and journals. However, the chapters here do build upon the attention paid in these handbooks, textbooks, and journals to complementarity and mixed methods. Namely, there is growing recognition in the field of educational research generally, and in research on the teaching of the English language arts specifically, that the use of singular methodologies—regardless of how elegant their conduct and eloquent their rationale—are not up to providing the field with a sufficiently deep understanding of educational problems to allow educators and policy makers to address the needs of students and communities effectively (Gutierrez et al., this volume). Indeed, too often educational research has reified, reduced, and simplified the complex psychological, social, cultural, linguistic, and political nature of teaching and learning the English language arts. Too often, educational research has failed to take seriously what it means to locate teaching and learning in time and place. Students and teachers evolve and change over time as do the multiple layers of context in which they learn and teach. As a consequence, educational research has too often eschewed deep understanding of the complexity, multiple
dimensions and layers (hereafter, multiplicity), and timeliness of educational problems in order to offer simple and simplistic policies, practices, and programs.

Similarly, in much of the educational research that has been used to inform educational policy and the professional development of teachers and in teachers’ planning documents, patterns of practice are shared and debated in compact, idealized terms (e.g., teaching writing models, small-group writing session, inquiry-based projects, open classroom discussion, peer-tutoring mathematics worksheets). These idealizations might come from central or local policy documents, professional development experiences, teacher preparation programs, or from the cultural models of teaching and learning held by educators, parents, and others who too often look to program outcomes and ignore the learning journey. It is only through close, detailed research that embraces the complexity, multiplicity, and timeliness of teaching and learning can deep understandings be generated of how it is that features of everyday processes in classrooms (what teachers and students do together) provide or deny opportunities for and the take up of deep learning of academic discourses.

Each of the chapters in this section provides ways of approaching the complexity, multiplicity, and the need for substantive engagement in research on the teaching and learning of the English language arts. It is in this sense that the chapters in this edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts* both build on and differ from the past edition. The chapters from the previous edition continue to inform and provide a base for our understandings of research perspectives, methodologies, and methods (as do the handbooks, textbooks, and journals noted earlier). But the field has evolved, and the optimism that a single perspective, methodology, or well-orchestrated use of methods, will provide the deep understanding needed by educators and policy makers to address trenchant educational problems is gone. Nor is there optimism that a single perspective, methodology, or well-orchestrated use of methods, will provide the deep understanding needed by educators and policy makers to address trenchant educational problems is gone. Nor is there optimism that a single perspective, methodology, or well-orchestrated use of methods, will provide the deep understanding needed by educators and policy makers to address trenchant educational problems is gone. Nor is there optimism that a single perspective, methodology, or well-orchestrated use of methods, will provide the deep understanding needed by educators and policy makers to address trenchant educational problems is gone. Nor is there optimism that a single perspective, methodology, or well-orchestrated use of methods, will provide the deep understanding needed by educators and policy makers to address trenchant educational problems is gone. Nor is there optimism that a single perspective, methodology, or well-orchestrated use of methods, will provide the deep understanding needed by educators and policy makers to address trenchant educational problems is gone. Nor is there optimism that a single perspective, methodology, or well-orchestrated use of methods, will provide the deep understanding needed by educators and policy makers to address trenchant educational problems is gone. Nor is there optimism that a single perspective, methodology, or well-orchestrated use of methods, will provide the deep understanding needed by educators and policy makers to address trenchant educational problems is gone.

The authors of the chapters in this section make clear that methodologies are not defined by the tools employed but by the epistemological and ontological assumptions researchers hold and by the theorizing that defines what teaching and learning the English language arts is (Calfee & Chambliss, this volume). They also make clear that such theorizing is not static but may evolve within a study (e.g., Athanases, this volume; Chapman & Kinloch, this volume; Gutierrez, this volume; McNaughton, this volume; Moss, this volume; Smagorinsky, this volume; Liddicoat, this volume), as a function of concerted efforts to be more inclusive of diverse communities and histories (e.g., Willis, this volume; Carter, this volume; McNaughton, this volume; Moss, this volume; Smagorinsky, this volume; Liddicoat, this volume), and as a function of the evolving interplay and tensions among research, policy, and practice (e.g., Freebody, this volume; McNaughton, this volume; Calfee & Chambliss this volume).

Reading across the chapters in this section, there are six ideas we highlight as marking an evolution in approaches to researching the teaching and learning of the English language arts. Not every chapter addresses all six, and each chapter considers important issues beyond the six listed below. These six ideas are not specific to a particular methodology or paradigm, although some are more prominent in some approaches to research than others. Before listing and discussing these six ideas, we note that when we invited these authors to write their chapters we did not envision these six ideas. They are ideas with long histories and are not, in and of themselves, new. What is new, however, is that they have moved to the center of discussion about how to frame methodologies for research in the teaching and learning of the English language arts.

1. Dialogic logics-of-inquiry. It is common place to look for coherence in a research study among the theoretical framing, the methodology, and the interpretation of findings. Without supplanting the importance of such coherence, the chapters in this section challenge the necessary linearity of such coherence. Athanases (this volume), Chapman and Kinloch (this volume), Smagorinsky (this volume), and Willis (this volume) argue that there is a dialectical relationship between theory and practice and among theory, methodology and data collection. Coherence may also involve a recursive relationship.

Coherence may also be defined as articulate and deep engagement in a “productive tension between convention
and creativity, the aesthetic and the functional, acquisition, production, innovation, and critique” (Freebody, this volume). Liddicoat (this volume) adds another dimension to such a dialectic. He writes “A reflective research design is therefore one which considers how language, which is often the focus of investigation itself, positions the research participants, impacts on their identities and agent positions and (re)produces discourses of marginalisation or deficit.” It will no longer do to treat the conduct of research as a procedural algorithm in which a theory yields a methodology that yields findings and interpretations. Instead, researchers need to reflect upon and respond to the relationships of theory, methodology, and findings, and the tensions that are created by difficulty in capturing the complexity, multiplicity, and timeliness of teaching and learning the English language arts in a substantive manner. Further, researchers need to push beyond single studies or even single programs of research, to look across cases, to look across time, and across research programs (McNaughton, this volume; Smagorinsky, this volume).

One way to describe the call for more dialogically oriented logics-of-inquiry is by analogy to Bakhtin’s (1935/1981) concept of heteroglossia. For Bakhtin, the aesthetic and import of the novel derived from the multiple voices expressed. This included the voices of the various characters and narrators, but also the other voices implied from other novels, literary works, and from other sources including people’s everyday lives. Every utterance of the novel reflects and refracts the past utterances of others from diverse locations. Similarly, the idea here is to recognize the “heteroglossia” involved in researching the teaching and learning of the English language arts, and to craft with it a coherence that will allow for substantive engagement.

2. The centrality of time. As McNaughton (this volume) notes, in attempting to understand language and literacy development, it is important to capture both historical change and individual change. In researching the teaching and learning of the English language arts, the time scales (cf. Lemke, 2000) involved may extend from a few minutes to decades; regardless, people and their contexts change over time. People do not exist in individual bubbles isolated from what is happening around them. They are complexly and multiply located in time. And while it may be difficult for any one study or program of research to capture both historical change and individual change over a significant period of time, as a field we need to recognize both dimensions and interpret our studies in a “timely” manner.

Time becomes a factor in the development of relationships during the research process. Researchers hesitate to enter a site for research without first building trust and rapport with the participants in ways that demonstrate their solidarity with the group (Willis, this volume). Teacher-research is often conducted as part of larger professional development projects that may occur over a significant amount of time (Athanases, this volume). Additionally, participant-researcher trust and study trustworthiness are strengthened and directly connected to time spent in the field.

3. Location matters. Although many classrooms may share some similar features, there are no generic classrooms. The particularities of each classroom matter as does its physical and social location within a school, within a local community, with a region, and a nation (Athanases, this volume). It makes a difference whether teachers and students are laboring under the nation-state policies of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top or under the state policies of Literate Futures (Freebody, this volume). And, it makes a difference about how one location is related to another; how the classroom is related to the home and community (Moss, this volume). These locations and their relationships to each other serve as sites of knowledge reproduction and reconstruction. The context of learning is taken beyond the physical space of classrooms and shared with local community members, organizations, and resources (Chapman and Kinloch, this volume).

Although there has always been movement through immigration and various economically and politically driven changes, location may matter more so in contemporary educational research because of the increased pace of such movement and because of increased economic and cultural globalization. For many students, being in a place is always about the cultural and linguistic juxtaposition of where they are from, where they are now, and where they may be in the future (cf. Liddicoat, this volume). Additionally, students’ connections between the school, home, and community are strained by the disparate locales they claim.

What constitutes the “local” is also influenced by people, events, and agendas that may be distant. It may often seem to teachers and students that people thousands of miles away want to manage what happens in their classroom; and, it may also be the case that teachers and students pull into the classroom ideas, frameworks, resources, etc., from distant places. The complexity and multiplicity of location affects what counts as knowledge, who has knowledge, the social, cultural, and linguistic identities of the teacher and the students (Moss, this volume), and re-framing traditional teacher-student roles in non-traditional learning spaces (Chapman and Kinloch, this volume). The local is no longer easy to define.

4. Language matters. Liddicoat (this volume) argues that there is an English monolingualism in research on the teaching and learning of the English language arts. Such monolingualism is not a technical matter to be solved by the hiring of translators, but rather is an epistemological bias. Too often, he argues, the knowledge and competence of students who are not native English speakers is under appreciated or overlooked. As importantly, the monolingualism of research studies frames the object of study in ways that distort what constitutes teaching and learning. Liddicoat argues that “the key issue in research design is not so much methodology as a reconceptualization of what constitutes research practice in contexts of linguistic and cultural diversity.”
Although not focused on the diversity of languages per se, Carter (this volume) and Freebody (this volume) raise similar issues. Language is both the object of study (the language teachers and students use in instructional conversations, the language of the literature they read, their writings, etc.) as well as the means by which research occurs (researchers ask questions, write field notes, conduct surveys, write up reports). For students and for researchers, language can constrain and control but it can also open up possibilities, liberate, and provide create potential. Carter (this volume) focuses attention on the analysis of talk and text by making visible the ways that language can constrain critical inquiry and negatively position students. Subtly (and sometimes not subtly at all), the wordings and ways teachers, students, and textbooks use language promote an epistemology and a world view that may privilege some at the expense of others (see also Willis, this volume). What is at issue here in research on the teaching and learning of the English language arts is not just the need to increased attention to such hegemonies but also the need to understand that such dynamics occur even when the topic of the study is focusing elsewhere.

5. Knowledge is diversely located. Part of what is at stake in a research methodology is whose knowledge and whose histories count for generating a logic-of-inquiry (see Athanases, this volume; Carter, this volume; Freebody, this volume; Gutierrez et al., this volume; Liddicoat, this volume; Moss, this volume; Willis, this volume). This involves the knowledge students have and bring to the classroom and also the knowledge base employed by the field in constructing the logics-of-inquiry for research. For example, Carter (this volume) and Willis (this volume) argue that the roots of critical discourse analysis and of critical theory, respectively, do not lie just in European social theories. They point to intellectual histories of African American scholars and activists that also inform critical approaches. Athanases points to the knowledge teachers bring to researching teaching and learning and argues for “practice-based evidence” as part of the configuration in conceptualizing a logic-of-inquiry.

Action Research, teacher-led research, and students as researchers (Willis, this volume; Athanases, this volume; Chapman & Kinloch, this volume) are direct challenges to traditional modes of research. In these new amalgamations of research methods and methodologies the knowledge authority is placed inside the learning community, not in a distant physical space or with outside researchers. Teachers and students become the experts of their situations and are the motivated change agents to seek solutions to contemporary issues. The researcher becomes the facilitator and documenter of the process and outcomes rather than the primary tool of the research.

6. Methodologies are motivated. By motivated we mean that they involve a particular way of seeing the world, a particular place from which to view the world, a particular language with which to characterize it, particular notions of epistemology and ontology, and a particular agenda. That methodologies are motivated do not make them pernicious nor does the notion of methodologies as motivated result in a limbo of relativity. Rather, to note that methodologies are motivated highlights the importance of a dialogic approach to conducting research, critical reflection on the limits of research, and the importance of looking across studies and programs of research.

Part of what is required in constructing a logic-of-inquiry on the teaching and learning of the English language arts is consideration of how the knowledge constructed in study travels. For example, Chapman & Kinloch (this volume) offer the construct of “fittingness,” a process whereby potential consumers decide whether the knowledge from a research study fits their particular situation and how it might be adapted to their particular situation. What is at the heart of the concept of “fittingness” is a sense of respect and mutuality between the researcher and the people (the teachers and students) in the research study and with the consumers who might use the findings.

Willis examines the use of critical race theory as a framework for research in English language arts. This theory is unapologetically motivated by the centrality of race and racism, the researcher’s epistemology, and the federal and local policies which affect the experiences of teachers and students.

Final Comments

Taken together, the chapters here raise a challenge to the field of research on teaching and learning the English language arts. How can we construct methodologies that capture the complexity, multiplicity, and timeliness of teaching and learning in a manner that allows researchers, educators, and the general public to have substantive engagement with what counts as knowledge, whose knowledge counts, when, where, and how? How can we construct a heteroglossic context for the conduct and use of research that has sufficient coherence to inform and move practice and policy forward without constraining the imaginations of teachers, students, and researchers? What does it mean to construct research in English language arts with such different approaches than what is being privileged in education policy?

As Freebody notes, research exists in the public sphere. What we do and how we do it is part of the public construction of civic society and culture. Like it or not, research has been incorporated into the public policy sphere and in controversial ways which hold serious consequences for teachers and students. Elmore (1996) has noted three “conceits” embodied in much educational policy and reform:

- the new policy automatically takes precedence over and replaces previous policies;
- policies emanate from a single level of a system and embody a single message about what educators should do differently; and
- policy can and should operate in more or less the same way in whatever settings it is implemented.
The question for researchers is: What type of research programs could begin to address these “conceits,” could, perhaps, reveal them not only as “conceits” but as active obstacles to the reform of educational practice and policy in the English language arts? In order to be valuable to teachers and students and viable to policy makers, the field of English language arts requires that phenomena be studied in diverse and multiple ways that account for time, location, language, perspective, history, and innovative inquiry.

References


