Sustainable WAC

A WHOLE SYSTEMS APPROACH TO LAUNCHING AND DEVELOPING WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM PROGRAMS

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A 2008 survey of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs found that nearly half of those identified in a 1987 survey no longer existed twenty years later, pointing to a need for an approach to WAC administration that leads to programs that persist over time. In Sustainable WAC, three current or former WAC program directors introduce a theoretical framework for WAC program development that takes into account the diverse contexts of today’s institutions of higher education, aids WAC program directors in thinking strategically as they develop programs, and integrates a focus on program sustainability.

Informed by theories that illuminate transformative change within systems and illustrated with vignettes by WAC directors across the country, this book lays out principles, strategies, and tactics to help WAC program directors launch, relaunch, or reinvigorate programs within the complicated systems of today’s colleges and universities.

College.
Editors’ Introduction

Bridging Generations in RTE: Reading the Past, Writing the Future

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As we write this introduction to our inaugural issue of Research in the Teaching of English, youth in the United States and beyond are marching in protest of gun violence in the wake of the tragic killing of fourteen students and three staff members at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. From what is being labeled “The March for Our Lives,” powerful images of literacy are being circulated across the media, one of the most poignant of which has been Emma González’s speech in Washington, DC. In front of a crowd of hundreds of thousands, González, a Parkland survivor, drew on rhetorical and oratory traditions of dissent to memorialize and humanize her peers who had been killed by naming them individually and emphasizing the absolute finitude of their lives cut short. González then mobilized silence—an arresting and reverberating 4 minutes and 26 seconds of silence—to invite the audience into the terror of the mass shooting and appeal to the collective conscience of those who might choose life over profits.

The March for Our Lives resonates with other social movements of our turbulent and divisive social moment—most notably, Black Lives Matter, the Women’s March, the #MeToo movement, the immigrant rights movement, and Standing Rock—all addressing longstanding systemic violence and oppression and new permutations of racism, xenophobia, and exploitation. These visible and collective public efforts to mobilize change and address injustice leverage many decades of work by communities and youth, particularly young people of color like March for Our Lives speaker Naomi Wadler, to call attention to pervasive gun violence and its intersections with racism, poverty, and domestic violence. They are also connected to legacies of protest and social activism that extend back through human history.

While the current climate may feel unprecedented in some ways, the images of marches and student-led movements scrolling on our TV screens and digital media devices remind us of the importance of looking back into history to see both its resonances in the present and how it might instruct us for the future. We can look, for instance, to the first issues of RTE published 50 years ago, in the late 1960s, during another momentous and turbulent time in modern history. It was a period punctuated by ongoing turmoil: the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which sparked uprisings in over 100 cities; the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy; the launch of the Tet Offensive and the My Lai Massacre, which fueled
the anti-war movement at its peak; the rise of Black Power, symbolized by the Human Rights Salute at the Olympics; the grape boycott led by a coalition of Filipino and Mexican farmworkers; the Stonewall riots; and, outside of the United States, the May student and workers’ strikes in France and Senegal, the Prague Spring, the state-sanctioned killings of student and civilian demonstrators in Tlatelolco, Mexico City, and the beginning of The Troubles in Northern Ireland. The period also ushered in some of the most significant legislation of the Civil Rights Era, such as the Fair Housing Act, the Bilingual Education Act, and the Architectural Barriers Act, which required wheelchair accessibility in structures receiving federal money, including some schools.

Throughout these movements and events, students and educators were at the forefront, and scholarly institutions were sites of contestation, change, and controversy. Education was, and continues to be, inextricable from broader political and social contexts. For example, the 1968 student-led strikes at San Francisco State University initiated the formation of the first ethnic studies program, beginning a struggle that continues today at Tucson Unified School District and in ongoing debates throughout the country about whose histories, knowledges, and intellectual legacies will be represented in the curriculum. It was also in 1968 that the Brazilian literacy educator Paulo Freire first published *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

We draw these parallels between the 1960s and today not to collapse the important social, economic, and political differences between these eras, but to highlight the significance of recognizing, drawing on, and learning from these histories in the work of imagining and practicing English education now. A common thread linking the past and present in English education is the struggle over literacy’s meaning and its impact on people’s lives. Then, as now, literacy has been used to subordinate, whether through children’s books that perpetuate stereotypes (Thomas, 2016), media propaganda (Hobbs, 2017), the demagogic rhetoric of politicians (Snyder, 2017), or algorithms that reinforce bias, thereby fomenting division and reproducing difference (Dixon-Román, 2016; Noble, 2018). Then, as now, literacy has also been a vehicle for empowerment and a means of fulfilling democracy’s promise, which is perpetually under threat.

In reflecting on the histories of the struggle and impact of literacy’s meanings, we immediately think of King’s 1968 “I Have Been to the Mountaintop” speech, but we might also take note of his more radical “The Other America” speech, reiterated in the months before his death, in which he states that “a riot is the language of the unheard.” These sentiments are echoed in the oratory and writings of current-day activists (such as the platform of the Movement for Black Lives), which carry on literate legacies of resistance through modern composing practices and participatory technologies.

Examining these resonances across past, present, and future is a critical move for educators and scholars who seek to create social transformation and work toward justice. In the 1960s, young people displayed media savvy as they exposed state violence and brutality for the world to see. Today, student activists are engaging in similar practices while utilizing new forms of social media (Stornaiulolo &
Thomas, 2017) and employing innovative leaderless tactics of political and social organizing (Hardt & Negri, 2017). And in innumerable educational contexts over the decades—both in and out of school—educators, students, and youth have developed myriad strategies to resist deficit ideologies. They have used language and literacy as a means of individual and collective self-definition, asserting one’s fuller humanity and sometimes coalescing with others to convey ways of knowing, desires, and potentials beyond the narrow evaluative metrics employed to constrain their lives (Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez, 2013). These stories are too often “untold” (Everett, this issue), but are sometimes documented and explored through scholarship in journals such as Research in the Teaching of English.

Our Vision
As new editors of Research in the Teaching of English, we hope that our brief discussion of the 1960s and our contemporary times draws attention to the social and cultural conditions of knowledge production. We aim to be critically reflexive about what the philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff (2017) calls the “transcendentalist illusion: a belief that thought can be separated from its specific, embodied, and geo-historical source” (p. 397). This illusion, which Alcoff attributes to ethnocentrism and histories of colonization, would view research as neutral, universalizing its own location and thereby excluding multiple worldviews and opportunities for genuine intellectual dialogue. Our vision is to honor the tradition of RTE and its multiple disciplinary genealogies, while simultaneously looking forward by continuing to feature scholarship—including from nondominant intellectual legacies—that helps the field both consider its past and expand its own epistemic horizons.

Central to this vision is a commitment to conceptual and methodological pluralism. We believe a diversity of perspectives is necessary for inquiry into the complex, interdisciplinary landscape of English education, which has multiple roots, including in psychology, linguistics, composition and rhetoric, literary criticism, anthropology, and critical theory. 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 instruction. We believe a key aspect of methodological rigor and innovation across paradigms is attention to ethics. For instance, what are the ethics of working with families and students, particularly those who are vulnerable in and outside of schools? How might concepts like benefit, risk, or informed consent need to be further theorized to meet the needs of contemporary research in the digital age and during a period of stark political divisions? Explicit consideration of these types of ethical questions can contribute to how the field thinks about literacy teaching, learning, and research as a relational and humanizing endeavor—and helps to spotlight our own roles as educators in creating equitable conditions for all people to learn and thrive. Our vision is animated by a principle of respect for the dignity of everyone involved in the research process.
Introduction to the Issue
This first issue of our editorship represents our efforts to read the past, examine the present, and imagine the future, and to do so in ways that reflect the field’s conceptual and methodological pluralism. We introduce a new forum section we call In Dialogue, which features short invited pieces focused on key conceptual and methodological issues facing literacy and English education. These essays will foreground modes of literacy inquiry within and beyond the academy—for instance, those growing out of teacher research groups, arts initiatives, activist movements, and grassroots community organizations. We believe that this new section will highlight multiple locations from which knowledge is generated, contributing to our understanding of issues at the heart of literacy teaching and learning.

For this issue’s In Dialogue, we expand our reflection on the parallels between the years of RTE’s founding in the late 1960s and today. Recognizing generational knowledge as a resonance of the past surfacing in the present, we have invited three renowned scholars to contribute short reflections on their journeys through the profession: Celia Genishi, Sonia Nieto, and Carol D. Lee. All of these leaders have, through their research, teaching, and mentorship, left an indelible mark on English language arts and literacy education. As their contributions make clear, their work—which has so decisively contoured the conversations of the field—is itself shaped by the historical moments in which they have lived. Taken together, these pieces illuminate the role history plays in shaping our present. Importantly, we see these essays gesturing toward history’s role in directing us toward more equitable futures.

Much like the contributions to our In Dialogue forum, the articles in this issue each, in their own way, build on earlier scholarly conversations. Sinéad Harmey and Bobbie Kabuto examine the metatheoretical similarities and differences between running records and miscue analysis—the latter of which, too, emerged during the late 1960s and shaped subsequent practice in the teaching of reading. Miscue analysis (Goodman, 1969), a topic still under considerable scrutiny by members of NCTE’s Whole Language Umbrella, has challenged deficit ideologies because it begins with the assumption that all children are meaning-makers, and that their “miscues” (rather than “errors”) are windows into their emerging theories about the workings of language and literacy. The authors’ analysis reveals that while miscue analysis and running records share some coherence, they also have important differences that, in practice, can influence how particular reading behaviors are understood. In an illustrative example, they show how the same reader is framed as effective through one lens and as reading at the “frustration level” through the other. Given the conflation of running records and miscue analysis in research and practice, Harmey and Kabuto underscore the need to interrogate the seeming neutrality of tools for evaluating student oral reading performance and to examine how the theories informing assessments affect subsequent “results.”

The second article in this issue turns toward “untold” narratives about students from nondominant communities. For generations, African American educators and scholars have sought to highlight the strengths that Black children and teens
bring to the classroom, countering both racist myths and stereotypes about Black intellect, as well as a more recent neoliberal focus on closing achievement gaps on standardized assessments. Sakeena Everett joins this rich legacy of counterhegemonic critical ethnography, bringing it to bear in her study featuring Shawn, an African American high school English student learning to deploy metaphor within a pedagogical framework Everett calls consequential writing. While developed for a particular summer writing workshop, Everett’s consequential writing framework shares connections to the African American rhetorical tradition. As the author argues, “This kind of critique, which disrupts the negative ways Black male students are often positioned in academic spaces, is part of a broader educational discourse that asserts, ‘not only do Black Lives Matter, but Black Minds Matter.’” Everett’s research and pedagogical focus on improving the writing of a Black male student who is already successful in school is a powerful example of reading the past in order to write new futures.

In the issue’s final article, Meghan A. Sweeney turns the spotlight on postsecondary literacies, presenting the case of first-generation college student Bruce and his postsecondary reading practices in and across disciplinary communities. Sweeney builds on recent work in composition studies about how students draw on threshold concepts in learning to write, extending that line of inquiry to explore how audience awareness serves this function in postsecondary reading. She traces how Bruce, a biochemistry major, moved across stages of liminality as he developed an increased awareness of audience in different disciplinary contexts over the course of a year. Sweeney’s research suggests that an explicit focus on teaching audience awareness in writing classrooms can be an important lever in supporting students’ effective participation in disciplinary literacy communities. In addition to spotlighting the importance of studying postsecondary reading, Sweeney focuses on the power dimensions at play in “basic writing” classrooms, drawing on a long history of scholarship seeking to frame college writers who have been labelled as “remedial” or “struggling” that has characterized the field since the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) was founded as part of NCTE in 1949.

**Conclusion**

Since its founding in 1967, *Research in the Teaching of English* has been a leading venue for empirical investigation and inquiry in reading, literacy, and English education. That history must be read in relation to the current moment: information is circulating much more rapidly than in the past, academic access is increasingly limited, and schools, students, families, and communities at the margins are demanding that scholars engage in research with and alongside them. These challenges require attention to the changing world of academic research in general, and research on language and literacy education in particular.

We begin this term during the fractured times of the late 2010s; we will pass the torch on to the next editors in the middle of 2023. While we recognize that unanticipated new events, policies, and trends that shape schooling and society
alike can render the pages of time into a palimpsest, we are hopeful that our collective past will point us toward a more just future. Just as millennial and Generation Z activists stand on the legacies of previous social struggles, we too have been influenced by our mentors, as well as those whose work we have engaged throughout the years. During our editorial term, we seek to amplify scholarship that reflects the times in which we live while being rooted in the conversations that have shaped the field before the present. We carry on the legacy and vision of previous editors of RTE, including most immediately Ellen Cushman and Mary M. Juzwik, who generously guided us through the editorial transition period and inspired us with their leadership. We are joined by our team of outstanding University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education reading/writing/literacy doctoral students, Phil Nichols (2017–2018), Emily Schwab (2017–2019), James Joshua Coleman (2017–2019), and Emily Plummer (2018–2019), whose efforts as editorial assistants are invaluable to our work. We look forward to undertaking this collective scholarly journey, and invite you to join us over the next five years.

REFERENCES


