INNOVATIONS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER EDUCATION

ADVANCES IN RESEARCH ON TEACHING

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FOREWORD TO *INNOVATIONS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER EDUCATION*

> Of the virtues received from our [predecessors] we can afford to lose none …. But merely to preserve those is not enough. A task is laid upon each generation to enlarge their application, to ennoble their conception, and, above all, to apply and adapt them to the peculiar problems presented to it for solution.
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> — Addams (1912/2002, p. 171)

I've been an English teacher for over 30 years, and at no time in my career have I been less certain about what I do for a living. A glance at the texts on my home bookshelves suggests as much: *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin, the complete works of Shakespeare, a Spanish-English dictionary, *The Human Condition* by Hannah Arendt, a biography of the civil rights leader Ella Baker, *Capital* by Karl Marx, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. Were it not for the back copies of *English Education* and *RTE* on a bottom shelf, anyone wandering into my study could be forgiven for thinking that this is the collection of someone who had switched undergraduate majors three or four times.

That I am usually untroubled by my uncertainty is due in part to evidence that many English teacher educators share my sense of the eclectic nature of our work. To summarize the, "Beliefs statement: What is English education?" (2007) that emerged from the 2005 CEE Conference and Policy Summit, our field encompasses "interdisciplinary inquiry" into the teaching and learning of English, as well as the preparation and support of teachers who "prepare learners to be creative, literate individuals; contributors to the cultural, social, and economic health of their communities; and fully participating and critically aware citizens of our democracy in a complex, diverse, and increasingly globalized world." Though this description of what we English educators do is accurate and as precise as it can reasonably be, it also indicates the expansiveness of our analytical and methodological horizons. Moreover, while implying an ethical rationale for what we do, the statement also invites multiple interpretations of what, for instance, a "creative, literate individual" is and how to help young people grow as

"critically aware citizens." As a profession, then, it seems that we English educators are in an ongoing position similar to that of a person who ponders existential questions best considered at once: Who am I? What should I do, and why?

The authors who have contributed to this book are deeply engaged in innovative explorations of these questions, and this book is needed now precisely because − to paraphrase the epigraph to this Foreword − it is essential to ennoble, apply, and adapt the virtuous work previously accomplished in our field to our present situations. Because teaching and learning is inevitably grounded in practice, any such adaptations, any renewed understandings of our identities and aims as English educators, cannot remain exclusively in the realm of abstract speculation; rather, these understandings will emerge as contingent responses to students as we encounter them in particular places and times.

It is due to this "groundedness" of our work that − as Cori McKenzie, Michael Macaluso, and Kati Macaluso suggest in Chapter 1 − the question of "what" we do is inseparable from the "why." For my part, among the many questions that contribute to my confusion as I work at this what/why intersection is whether I should teach students reading and writing because they offer personal enrichment and enjoyment of life or whether this view is a bourgeois luxury, a self-indulgent evasion of my responsibility to help students master the dominant discourses that often increase people's access to desirable careers. I wonder, too, whether the emphasis in my methods classes on emerging technologies liberates students to create and exchange ideas or whether these digital literacies are alienating and corrosive to conversations that would otherwise unfold in the physical presence of others.

But of all the questions I grapple with, the one that perhaps best represents a convergence of our professional desires to do some good in this world is this: How can we English educators teach to promote social justice? As Deborah Bieler and Leslie David Burns astutely point out in this book, any attempt to answer that question must be provisional, and because I think that's true, I find myself continually unsettled by writers who raise additional questions regarding what is possible or acceptable in teaching for social justice, even if provisionally so. Reinhold Niebuhr, forinstance, had little patience for "sociologists and educators" who believed that inequities could be ameliorated by improving people through schooling and the cultivation of collective intelligence. Instead, Niebuhr (1932/2013) argued that "when collective power … exploits weakness, it can never be dislodged unless power is raised against it" (p. xii). This dismissal of pursuing justice through an informed communitarianism is taken a step

further by Slavoj Zizek, who insists that those who struggle for meaningful freedom from structural violence must at times engage in "divine violence" – which is "divine" precisely because it results in justice (2008, p. 162).

As much as this posture of overt antagonism seems at odds with our best intentions or unit plans, Jacques Ranciére goes so far as to say that teachers' role as "master explicators" is fundamentally incompatible with democratizing politics. In Ranciére's view, we educators get it wrong by assuming an intellectual inequality between us and our students, and this inevitably establishes a hierarchy of knowledge and status that perpetuates and justifies social inequality. The sole alternative, Ranciére insists, is to commit ourselves to the idea that "equality [is] not an end to attain, but a point of departure, a supposition to maintain in every circumstance" (1991, p. 138). To Ranciére, only from this radically egalitarian starting point can an intermittent politics emerge as individuals verify their status as equal subjects, and they do this by thinking and acting in ways that create dissensus in the existing sociopolitical order (2004). As Ranciére sees it, this kind of intellectual and political "emancipation" is something we simply can't teach (1991. p. 133). Why? Because the moment we begin to explain things to others, we re-establish an intellectual hierarchy and its attendant inequalities.

For my purposes here, these writers do not just disrupt the paradigms of progressivism and critical pedagogy that we have relied upon to affirm what Bieler and Burns call the "critical centrality" of social justice in English education; rather, they also pose a direct challenge to what might uncharitably be called our pretensions to political relevance. To the extent that such challenges leave us unsettled, even confounded, they confirm the need for a book that, as Heidi L. Hallman describes this one, "intends to capture the spirit of disciplinary change." This notion of "disciplinary change" is, by my lights, worth underscoring, for it implies not alterations to a relatively stable field of scholarship, but an acknowledgment that a central feature of English education is – as de Man (1986) said of literary theory – "the impossibility of its definition" (p. 3). Viewed in this way, to become an English educator is to enter into an endless process of collective self-critique and contested re-creation.

But if English education is characterized by a perpetual lack of agreement regarding who we are, what we should do, and why, I think it's crucial that we understand such uncertainty not as a problem to be solved, but as a condition to be celebrated. From this perspective, to cultivate habits of disciplinary agility and intellectual humility is among our highest obligations as we seek out and set forth a constantly expanding repertoire

of ways to think and talk about issues we have found to be worthy of our attention. None of us is smart enough to do this on his or her own; no one has the time or expertise to delve into all the sub-specialties that are relevant to the preparation of ELA teachers. For this we must rely on each other, and the value of such mutual dependency and trust is admirably illustrated in the chapters that follow.

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO
INNOVATIONS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER EDUCATION

This is a book primarily for teacher educators who wish to contemplate "innovations" in the field of English Language Arts teacher education. Some scholars have called for a new English education (Kirkland, 2008, 2010), one that, in part, acknowledges the multiple languages and literacies that students bring to the classroom. Others, including Swenson, Young, McGrail, Rozema, and Whitlin (2006) have claimed that the field of English teacher education has been altered by the prevalence of new technologies, thereby urging a reconsideration of everything from what a text is to how mainstream discourses collide with students' home languages. Changes in the discipline, including the definition of "literacy" itself as moving away from a neutral skill-set and toward sociocultural, situated understandings (Gee, 1996; Street, 2003), have produced a much more expansive understanding of literacy and of what teachers of English language arts do. This book intends to capture the spirit of disciplinary change and do this with the goal of excitement, possibility, and hope.

The book also aims to engage with the history of the teaching of English. Part II moves toward articulating innovative lenses for preparing prospective teachers to teach English language arts. Squire (2003) notes that the models of secondary English language arts curriculum discussed at the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar, the *skills* model, the *cultural heritage* model, and the *personal experience* model — sometimes called *process* model — have remained salient, even today. These models have not been without criticisms. The *skills* model, stressing functional literacy, has been criticized for focusing too much on the acquisition of "correct" grammar, vocabulary, and spelling, and in so doing, has ignored other possible dimensions of the English curriculum. The *cultural heritage* model, stressing the need for a culturally unifying English curricular content and intending to fill a void left by the skills model, does not ultimately fill this void for it takes culture as a given. Instead of drawing on students' backgrounds and experiences to create a definition of culture, culture is viewed as something

outside of students' own experiences. Yet, the personal experience model, the model that Dixon most aligns himself with in his seminal text, *Growth through English (1967)*, is still very much alive in the English language arts. Part II of the book, with its emphasis on viewing students' lives as meaningful components of curriculum, sustains what Dixon hoped to do for the discipline: move from an attempt to define "'*What* English is' – a question that maintains the emphasis on nouns like *skills* and *proficiencies*, set *books*, and *heritage* – to a definition by *process*, a description of the activities we engage in through language" (Dixon, 2003, p. 7, italics in original). Part II is rich with the possibility of *process*.

An emphasis on process and experience is carried into the final section of the book, Part III, which focuses on social justice and partnership-oriented approaches to English language arts teacher education. As Kirkland (2008, 2010) notes, the new English Education is committed to diversity, technology, and hybridity, and is both a reaction to and an interaction with the current state of language in our world. In urban areas especially, a changing student demographic affects schooling because of linguistic and cultural pluralism and the predominance of technology in communication and literacy practices. Part III of the book aims to look more deeply at how relationships might be fostered between teacher education and the partners – the schools, communities, teachers, and students – that are so critical to the future of English teacher education.

The final section of the book contains the heart and soul of English teacher education today; that is, it urges prospective English teachers to embrace and understand the new English education and to undergo a metaphorical passage from an alignment with the standardized, white, schooled literacy to a pluralistic understanding and acceptance of what literacy is and can be. Within our postmodern educational setting, we must educate teachers to grapple with unsettling ideas, as described by Kirkland, "in which authority is de-centered, notions of truth are questioned and questionable, grand narratives are deconstructed, knowledge is functional, and Englishes are plural" (2010, p. 232). Prospective teachers must become, as Kirkland invites, brave enough to follow the seemingly radical literacy expressions of their trailblazing students (2008, p. 74). But, in complicating how prospective teachers see literacy, Part III stresses that the relational spaces of teacher-student, official-unofficial language, singular authority-pluralistic power, server-served must also be complicated. These hierarchical relationships are the "grand narratives" that must be deconstructed. Part III leaves us with the hope that, as teachers, teacher educators, and researchers in English language arts education, this can be realized.

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