"The Literature" in the Crafting of a Profession

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An Elevator Story: The Case of the Missing Hulshoffel

Once many years ago three professors of education were sharing an elevator. The senior of them was talking about his latest research, its implications and importance. One of his younger colleagues, perhaps mean-spirited, but more likely simply tired of the pomposity of this diatribe, calmly interjected with apparent innocence: "Yes, I think you're right about that. Of course you know of Hulshoffel's recent work on that topic?"

The senior colleague didn't miss a beat. He knew of Hulshoffel's work, of course, and was able to incorporate it into his discussion, exiting the elevator with an explanation of how it too fitted into his own argument.

The third educator in the elevator had remained quiet throughout. Puzzled by the conversation and the references to people he had never heard of, he said nothing, but nodded occasionally, hoping that the others would not "find him out."

Some time later, when the big talker had left their company, the citer of the Hulshoffel reference confided to the quiet one that Hulshoffel was no researcher but the owner of a clothing store in Nashville, Tennessee.

A Story of Context: The Case of the Current Case

More than two years ago we wrote an article in which we examined the rhetoric of the kind of research articles that regularly appear in *AERJ* (*American Educational Research Journal*). We were fortunate, we know, to have our rather unusual approach published in *AERJ* and we were encouraged by the number of personal responses we received from other educators who shared our sense that attending to rhetoric was an important but missing feature of educational research. Because we had worked so hard and long on that first article, because there were things we had wanted to say but had omitted as the article grew and took shape, and because we enjoyed working with each other, we decided to write a follow-up article that would focus more specifically on the uses

of citations and the ways references to "the literature" seemed to shape both the presentation of the findings and the conduct of the research.

We began with the belief that "the literature" represents an important, overarching focus for professional discourse, and that its role has become so pervasive and expected that it has become a ritualized part of the written and spoken discourse. We wanted to examine the practice of "the literature" in order to make its role problematic and thereby visible. We operated from the conviction that so important a practice that remains unexamined is likely to be corrosive of the very goals it was originally designed to serve.

Over the last two years we have written several drafts, struggling endlessly with how to understand the role of "the literature," as well as with how to present our understandings in a form that would not replicate the very practices we found so unsatisfying, yet meet the expectations of readers of academic scholarship. We have told each other stories of our experiences, including our experiences of reading the scholarship of others, and we have benefited from the comments of anonymous reviewers whose careful readings of earlier drafts helped us to see more clearly both the importance and confusions of our initial arguments.

We were convinced that "the literature" played an essential role in the conceptions of education represented in educational research, and so we determined to focus on the "uses" of "the literature" that contribute to the making of a profession. Part of our sense of how this relationship worked was our experience that educators often cite what "we know" on the basis of what is known via "the literature." We have witnessed the way such references close down discussions rather than open them up, and we have been privy to a number of stories from colleagues who tell us how they go about writing articles and/or conducting research studies.

We also knew from our work with historical texts that the formulation of research and/or writing for professional audiences was not always the same as we find so common today. The early journals of education, for example, often included unsigned, and thus uncredited, articles, and before the turn of the 20th century, written discussions of issues in education appeared regularly in the popular magazines of the time. We speculated that the rewards of these earlier forms of public discourse were not so closely linked to the requirements of an university system tied to research and to publication assuring tenure. When we attempted to investigate these hunches, we soon felt we were heading off track, for the argument we wished to make was not to be built through historical tracings of earlier practices, despite the interest such history engenders. What we wanted to suggest was that the economic and institutionalized practices that were regimented in standardizing the

form of research articles were also a part of the epistemologies of objectivity, the use of scientific method in professionalizing teaching, and the dissonance that has been created as epistemologies change and practices remain the same. We could find similar arguments in histories of other professions (which we reference in our next section), but we were not satisfied that such parallel stories clarified the uses of "the literature" in educational research journals.

We found ourselves wanting to assert numerous connections that we could not "prove" in a way that would be accepted by our colleagues who still believe in such notions as objectivity, neutrality, and the building of knowledge. And yet we were dissatisfied with our attempts to assert without some evidence functioning to support our interpretations. As we tried to select sentences that would illustrate the inadequacies of citations to "the literature," we were repeatedly confronted with both the difficulty of representing a sentence's function once it had been ripped from its surrounding context, and the even more impossible stance that implied we could tell what a single sentence was doing within a passage simply by looking. Because we could not see language as independent of context, nor read rhetorical constructions as neutral, we could find no easy way of making concrete either the particular practices we found so problematic or the abstract assertions we saw as so ideological and hierarchical. Although we have had in various drafts examples of specific points drawn from *AERJ* articles, we have finally exorcised all such specific sentences, relying instead on our readers to recognize the general accuracy of the points we raise. We hope to have thus avoided the appearance of having singled out specific authors as guilty of practices we are convinced are not only expected, but the tacit backdrop for any scholarly discussion of research.

We have also been troubled by how the discussion of rhetorical practices leads inevitably into a categorizing of research, and research articles, as divided into two camps, them and us, researchers and practitioners, quantitative and qualitative, empirical and phenomenological, objective and anecdotal, positivistic and hermeneutical. We are troubled by these binary divisions for a number of reasons, among them our own indignation at being constructed by others as "not belonging," as well as our sense that these camps are neither firmly fixed nor easy to avoid. Because we have come to see the terms, and practices, of education as highly contested, we can see no long-term benefit in repeatedly constructing the discussions about education as fixed debates with consistent advocates lining up in predictable ways. We want to open a conversation about rhetorical practices and the conceptions they imply and/or create because we believe attention to these practices is a reasonable first step in the critical self-consciousness of researchers, teacher-educators, and classroom teachers that parallels the kind of critical thinking currently being demanded of

students. We want to argue that reflection on the practices of researchers, including the discourse practices reflected in journal forms, is similar to the kind of reflection currently being advocated for teachers.

The Story of the Form: "The Literature" Did It

In our earlier examination of the rhetoric of educational research journals, we pointed out that research articles frame the discussion of the reported study with a section devoted to a review of "the literature" (Marshall & Barritt, 1990). We noted that such literature is rarely comprehensive, being generally limited to American studies of rather recent vintage. We argued that such framing is illogical given the range of potential (yet unmentioned) motivations for any particular research study, and that references to "the literature" contribute to an epistemology that is linked to objectivity and the accumulation of bits of knowledge.

We believe our earlier argument is essentially correct, but in the course of considering the uses of "the literature" we have encountered scholarship in other fields that we think helps explicate the ways educational research relies on "the literature" to justify and define the terms of research. Although there are many scholars in a variety of fields who might be usefully cited as relevant to a study of citation practices.[1] We think White's (1978) discussion of emplotment and Novick's (1988) historical tracing of objectivity in the profession of history might engender a rich discussion when brought into a consideration of the practices of educational research journals.

As White (1978) argues so succinctly in the introduction to his book *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, it is impossible to talk about the issues of "human nature, culture, society, and history" without slipping into the very language that aims to "prefigure" the ways such issues should or might be thought of. Such a move is not only inevitable, it is a creation—tropical—rather than logical (White, 1978). "Tropic is the shadow from which all realistic discourse tries to flee. This flight, however, is futile; for tropics is the process by which all discourse constitutes the objects that it pretends only to describe realistically and to analyze objectively (p. 2).

If we are correct in suggesting that White's (1978) analysis of what he calls "realistic discourse" is applicable to educational research journals, then it seems reasonable to suggest that at least one of the "tropics" of educational research is the review of "the literature" that frames individual research studies, justifies the decisions of method, and "grounds" the study by linking the new to what has come before. The very form of research articles emplots research as a linear story, the result of having read "the literature," and thus of having determined the gaps that must be filled in. Most researchers would admit, we

suspect, that rarely is the story of a research study so clean, so linear, or so free of the taint of humans making decisions, making choices. But the presentation of the stories of research as it appears in research journals is standardized and ritualized to provide coherence to both the study and the amassing of knowledge that justifies the claims of the profession to expertise.

If research journals presented the stories of research without the prefiguring through the tropic of the survey of "the literature," each article would tell a different story in a different way. Few articles would begin with work that had already been done and the questions researchers wished to pursue. More, we suspect, would admit to the missteps or to the dissonance between the researcher's personal experiences and the story told by "the literature." Perhaps the presentation would not change as much as we suspect; perhaps researchers really do begin with a review of "the literature," but if so, doesn't it seem likely that such a review would step outside the constraints of narrow fields of interest more often? We wonder how it is so universally possible for researchers to know before they actually do a study what the "relevant literature" is likely to be. Don't researchers read more broadly than the reviews of "the literature" reflect, and if they do not, shouldn't readers expect them to?

The Story of Coherence: The Case of Objectivity and the Building of Knowledge

As we have come to understand the practices of citing literature as linked to the evolution of the profession of education that emerged at the turn of the century, an evolution that is inevitably linked to positivistic epistemologies and the desire for objectivity (read scientific method), we have turned our attention to the scholarship that explicates this evolution, its claims of objectivity, and the institutional practices that are its result. Novick's (1988) discussion of professional historians' desires for objectivity in his book *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* is helpful. Novick explains the principal elements of historical objectivity as built on assumptions that include "truth as correspondence to that (historical) reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and above all between history and fiction." We hear in his list an echo of the assumptions of positivist research. The version of educational research portrayed most consistently in research journals is one that sees research as the search for facts and truths about classrooms, teaching, children, learning, and the conditions necessary to ensure success.

Novick (1988) argues that objective historians see their role as "neutral, or disinterested" and their allegiance is to objectivity rather than a particular ideology, ethnic group, political party, or national

agenda. The grip of ideas like objectivity and scientific method on academics at the turn of the century is not hard to understand. The unfairness of treatment accorded to children of different socioeconomic backgrounds coupled with the liberal ideology held by most academics enabled ideas like objective search for truth to take root. The problems born of rapid industrialization that swelled cities and altered the social and economic fabric of life at the turn of the century and the post-civil war demands for a laying aside of regional partisanship nurtured the mindset of neutrality and scientific method essential to the creation of all kinds of professions from journalism and medicine to social work and educational administration, research, and teacher certification. Having lain aside its faith in religion, the modern world embraced science, but this change in orientation brought with it the discourse practices of modern-day academics, including citations to "the literature," which have become the sacred texts of objectivity.

But in the postmodern world we now inhabit, the assumptions that spawned the quest for objectivity have all been challenged. Few of the researchers we know still accept as either possible or desirable the separation of knower from known. Fewer still see themselves as searching for Truth. Nevertheless, when we think of the arguments about multicultural education, or about expanding the literary canon to include the works of women and people of color, when we listen to our colleagues in the school of education argue about how many hours of methods courses are necessary to prepare new teachers or how many classes secondary teachers need to ensure "subject-area knowledge," we cannot help but hear some of the positions within those debates as operating as if fact could be stripped of value. We find it unfortunate, though not especially surprising, that we still have colleagues who believe that history shares little with fiction, or that the stories of teachers, students, and parents are not of a kind with the stories of researchers.

We are no longer surprised that such seemingly incompatible contradictions exist within the same world, system, institution, or individual. Nor do we think any of us is capable of either erasing the remnants of our collective history or avoiding our own inconsistencies; such is the nature of contested terms and changing epistemologies. But we do believe that educators as well as others (citizens, students, policy makers) can be helped to recognize the shifting epistemological ground that underlies such discourse. We think it possible to encourage students and teachers alike to examine and reflect on the practices and discourses in which they participate. If, for example, professional educators were to completely set aside the quest for objectivity, if the presentation and the conduct of research were to change in order to more accurately reflect the postmodern, poststructuralist epistemologies, what would be the new grounding for research? To whom,

or to what, would educators pledge their allegiance, and how would the profession of education construct itself in order to make common ground between those who would do research and those who would teach? We suspect that these differences may turn out to be not as significant as the profession has made them out to be.

When we begin to imagine a professional world where expertise is not crafted out of either knowledge of "the literature," adherence to method, or the search for objectivity, when we begin to imagine how "professional" would be given meaning if all of the stories of those involved in teaching others were treated as of the same kind, we find ourselves thinking very quickly of the practices that exist outside the pages of journals. We think, for example, of what it would mean to "certify" someone as competent to teach if what have come to be called "principles" of teaching were no longer seen as applicable in all situations. We wonder what "curriculum objectives" could represent if notions of disciplinary lines were not so rigid, and the arrangement of schools by grade levels were treated as a bureaucratic convenience rather than a natural reflection of child development and the research on cognitive development. We wonder who would be put in charge of, and who would attend, "staff development" if teaching and learning were recognized as interconnected and dependent on specific context.

We know that there are already places where teacher education is being reimagined along the lines of desired abilities, flexibilities, and themes of instruction like literacy or cultural criticism. We know too that such efforts are still met with resistance and that colleagues are still likely to insist that graduate students receive "training" in very particular research techniques, and that candidates for jobs within such faculties are still likely to be asked if they can teach English methods, or measurement, or educational psychology.

A Story in Summation: The Case of Profession Shaping

Educational research is rhetorical. Researchers must organize their arguments to justify the conduct of their study, its method, the accuracy of the results, and their interpretation to an audience of fellow researchers. As authors perform this rhetorical activity of constructing an argument, telling the story of their research as if it were telling itself, displaying the data in such a way as to fill the "gaps," support the interpreted conclusion, and ensure their own professional competence, they appropriate language and structures that will fulfill the expectations of their audience and reinforce the authority of professional knowledge. The activities of research, like the activities of writing, are largely those of interpretation and synthesis that necessitate a human author who can choose, decide, and communicate with others through discursive practices. However one feels about the possibility of objectivity in research procedures there can be no doubt that when a text is

being created, a mind is at work making choices about what to say and how to say it.

It has been difficult to see research as a rhetorical process because of the profession's use of formulaic presentations, that are so common and unquestioned as to have become rituals. The standardization of the form helps to create the impression that the form is irrelevant, that it is only the data that are convincing. And with every addition to the formulaic rituals, the profession of education is once again tied to epistemologies of neutrality and objectivity. Even when the topic of the discourse belies these notions of objectivity or positivism, of searches for truth and facts separated from context, the story the form tells reconstitutes the profession of education as controlled by a narrow view of science. Those who speak the language, those who know the forms, those who can cite "the literature" belong to the hierarchies of expertise and can call themselves professionals.

Relying on "the literature" to provide the solid foundation for the profession's knowing, as might be done in a natural science, overlooks the relationship between educational researchers and the people they profess to know about. It may make sense in natural science to say, for example, what "we know" based on the "the literature" about genes, or quarks, or some other phenomenon that is experienced only in the laboratory, but in education, where researchers study the lives of people, it seems at least an overstatement to suggest that those who speak with the authority of research are the only ones with the authority to "know." Saying that "the literature" represents what "we know" suggests that other knowledge is part of the unknown. It suggests that "the literature" is the background of certainty against which the uncertainties of ordinary, daily life are seen. By undercutting the certainties of daily life, the profession elevates its forms of exclusive understanding, along with its attendant technologies for finding out, to a sanctified position. And in doing so it drives a wedge between professional researchers and the others who are also educators, classroom teachers and parents among them. If research articles constituted the profession of education as larger than those who perform empirical research, would there be a need to talk of "translating" research into practice? If educational journals created a public space for members of an inclusive community to talk together, to consider dialogically their various sources of knowledge and the interpretations that might be made of both written and lived experiences, would the form for such public discourse remain rigidly linear, formulaic, and full of citations to "the literature"? We think not. We think practices inside journals both create and reflect practices of a socioeconomic world that escapes the written pages. We think attention to discursive practices provides the profession as a whole, and individuals within it, with a foothold for examining, critiquing, and changing conceptions and institutional instantiations. We

think we understand why physicists would never think of asking quarks to participate in a discussion of quarks, but we see no reason why students, teachers, parents, and others who have experience with, and concern for, education should not be part of the profession's discussions. Research in the human world seems to us to be markedly different from research in the natural sciences. Methods of study need to recognize these differences. So do the profession's rhetorical forms.

The profession can no more avoid telling its stories than individuals can, but it can choose the kinds of stories it tells, it can examine the implications of the forms of its story-telling, and it can alter, or allow individuals to create anew, the forms for telling and considering. Now that the epistemological foundations of objectivity have been called into question, and few believe any longer that adherence to method will guarantee accuracy or truth, the dissonance between the discursive practices and epistemology are more easily recognized. Changing the discourse to create a more reciprocal relationship between language practices and epistemologies is neither easy, fast, nor immediately available. Educators will need to create new forms for re-presenting the concerns with which they wrestle while "doing research," and they will need to avoid being trapped into silly arguments about replacing one set of terms with another. These issues are larger than matters of "mere" word choice. What we are suggesting is that discourse constitutes the profession's members and raises questions about ethical obligations, about the "civility" of our community.

For us the question of what to do differently when writing or conducting research remains largely unanswered. We no longer accept the epistemological assumptions that support a view of "the literature" as contributing objectivity or bits of knowledge to a growing body of expertise and authority that removes all doubt. Likewise, we are dissatisfied with constructions of the profession that separate, and often privilege, university researchers and the kinds of activities they conduct as "research." We are equally dissatisfied with uses of "the literature" that do not recognize that it, like teaching practice or the actual conduct of research, is a form of experience that needs less to be privileged than recognized as one more source of understanding. We share the frustrations of colleagues who have written us that though they would like to write in a way that reflects their thoughts and actions, they cannot do so if they wish to be published. Like them, we are participants in an socioeconomic system and in specific institutional settings that require us to speak what we do in the pages of journals. The prestige of publication, and our own personal desires to engage in conversation with others through public discourse, implicate us in the same practices we have been trying to explicate. We may not find a home for our argument in the pages of any journal that sees its task as promoting empirical research, and we may not be able to construct a

final version of this argument that successfully engages with others in a conversation about discursive practices, but if we do not change the ritual forms, if we do not talk of the way our research is not prefigured by "the literature" we might cite, we will be guilty of duplicity and inconsistency; we will have created yet another contradictory text. We hope, therefore, that our readers can tolerate disjunction long enough to consider the implications of our multiple stories and engage in the dialogic of examining their own experiences from "the literature" and from life set against the issues we have raised here.

Epilogue
A Hiring Story: The Case of Professional Relationships

Recently a candidate for an assistant professorship stood nervously at the front of a room full of faculty and graduate students at a major research institution and tried to explain her research study and the implications of her findings. At the question and answer period, one of the faculty whose field of study was related asked questions that began "have you found any literature about ..." to which the candidate answered "no."

When the hiring committee reconvened to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the candidate, the faculty member who had asked the questions about findings in "the literature" insisted that the candidate did not know "the literature" because she had not known to cite the "famous" names or "important" studies in "the field." This candidate would need special guidance and nurturing if she were to be hired, which this more knowledgeable faculty member would be only too happy to give, and so she urged the committee to offer the "ill-informed" candidate the position.

Notes

1. We have found Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey (1987) a useful introduction to the work concerned with rhetoric and rhetorical practices of a variety of disciplines. Bazerman's (1987) chapter is an especially relevant example of the kinds of practices that enter educational journals because of their relation to psychology.

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