

Preparing Doctoral Students to Study the “Knotty Problems” of Literacy Education

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As junior scholars in the field of literacy education who have recently completed our doctoral programs, we ask: To what degree are literacy education doctoral students—tomorrow’s scholars—being prepared to meet the demands of literacy education research that await them? How might doctoral programs more fully prepare novice scholars to ask and answer questions that will meaningfully advance the field?

We suggest that the pressing questions in literacy education require doctoral programs to emphasize question-based, integrative approaches in literacy research. We then offer a brief description of how we tackled our respective preliminary papers to learn such approaches, and we conclude by offering a set of considerations that others could bring to either their own doctoral studies or their mentorship of doctoral students.

The Need for Integrative Approaches in Literacy Education Research

In a recent call for question-based integrative approaches to education research, Moje (2014) writes that education’s “most pressing

questions are typically those that focus on knotty problems that cannot be addressed with only one lens or technique” (p. 84). To address the complex educational issues of our time, Moje suggests that researchers should seek to use the methods required to “address real questions or problems of education in a valid and contextually sensitive manner”—a pursuit that often necessitates multiple lenses and/or multiple data collection and analytic techniques (p. 84). Moje asserts that bringing question-based integrative approaches to education research requires deep facility with the logic of research design, skilled and flexible use of research methods, and the capacity to collaborate with others on the development and implementation of complex research designs.

Recent articles published in *JoLLE* have highlighted some of the current questions in literacy education, including, for example:

- how to leverage students’ language, literacy, and cultural practices for meaningful and rigorous learning (e.g., DeNicolo and Gónzalez, 2015);
- how historical, economic, and social contexts affect the language and literacy teaching and learning of children in the US and abroad (e.g., Papola-Ellis, 2014); and

- how the pedagogies, instructional goals, and structures of schooling may be reimagined in order to advance social justice (e.g., Vetter and Hungerford-Kressor, 2014).

These are knotty problems, indeed. And, they point to the need for literacy education researchers to be well prepared—perhaps more so than ever before.

Characterizing Typical Doctoral Preparation

But, how systematically are doctoral students offered opportunities for learning to develop question-based integrative approaches to literacy education research? Often, doctoral students in literacy education only have the opportunity to complete an entire research cycle from beginning to end in their own small-scale, qualitative dissertation studies. Such research allows students to develop and design a study from the ground up, grapple with questions of alignment, make decisions about participants and data, and learn to make warranted claims, among other opportunities. These experiences typically do not, however, provide students with opportunities to learn to collaborate with other researchers or tackle many of the big questions of education that might be better addressed through designs that include, for instance, a greater number of participants or sites or the use of

complementary methods. And, small scale qualitative studies tend not to allow researchers to make causal claims, claims about larger groups, or claims about trends across contexts (Brandt and Clinton, 2002).

In response to the same constraints and expectations, other literacy education doctoral students may conduct individual studies that are part of already-existing research projects. Such studies, while potentially larger in scale and valuable for reporting trends across contexts, among other benefits, do not tend to allow students to conduct research inquiries from beginning to end. Typically, the larger problem for the study has already been established and situated in the field, the data collection instruments have already been selected or designed, and the decisions about participants or sites have already been made by the principal investigator and the research team by the time a doctoral student chooses to use data from the project for his/her own study.

Neither of these patterns of literacy education research necessarily produces opportunities for new researchers to learn to design and conduct question-based integrative research. In both cases, the research designs and resulting claims are somewhat determined by the constraints as opposed to being determined by the problems at hand. And, in both cases, typically only one approach and theoretical lens is used.

Surely, a good deal of teaching and learning also happens as students participate on faculty members' research teams. However, again, such experiences are often highly contingent on funding, timing, and other factors; even though working as a research assistant is tremendously valuable, it is not a full answer to the programmatic need to consistently and systematically prepare doctoral students to bring question-based integrative approaches to their research.

This leads us to ask: If not in our doctoral training, where do we learn how to ask and answer the big questions of the field of literacy education? Where do we learn to collaborate with colleagues, to value a multiplicity of methods for understanding the same phenomenon, or to develop the logic of ambitious research design? Where do we learn how to design and conduct research from beginning to end that enables us to make strong claims that are still carefully situated in the social and cultural contexts of literacy teaching and learning?

Designing Formal Opportunities to Learn Question-Based Integrative Approaches

Our Approach

At our institution, qualifying exams for literacy education students include conducting a small-scale study. These studies can be empirical,

conceptual, or historical analyses, and they are to be completed within the first three years of one's doctoral program. The small-scale nature of the requirement is necessary for enabling pre-candidates to complete the study in a timely fashion while still taking courses.

When planning for our papers, we considered conducting small, individual qualitative studies, but instead we decided to collaborate on one project. Consistent with a question-based integrative approach, we began with a big problem: What are the literacy practices, processes, and motivations of a specified group of young people as they participate within and across multiple academic discourse communities? Clearly, the scope of this question was much too large for either of us to attempt on our own, particularly in the third year of our program.

Together, we developed a two-pronged research design that would enable us to explore our overarching question with a shared participant group. One prong, led by Emily, centered on the disciplinary reading practices of young people. In order to study her questions, she designed verbal protocols (Pressley and Afflerbach, 1995) in which participants read texts of multiple disciplines and thought aloud about the meaning they were making. She also conducted semi-structured interviews with participants in order to gain insight into how they understood their own

reading and reasoning in literary studies, history, and chemistry. She used constant comparative analysis to break apart and code data and discover themes (Glaser, 1965).

The second prong, led by Michelle, centered on the disciplinary writing practices of young people. To study her questions, she conducted multiple semi-structured interviews, including students' retrospective accounts of their writing processes (Greene and Higgins, 1994). She also conducted discourse analysis of their writing samples to examine how identity, epistemology, positionality, and power interacted to mediate students' experiences while learning to write in history class.

After selecting our research site and discussing the parameters of our individual research, we carried out our study in three phases.

- 1) Together, we developed survey and interview protocols, secured IRB approval, recruited students to participate in our study, and collected data. Our shared data set included field notes from observing our participants in school, survey results, writing samples, and audio recorded interviews and verbal protocols about students' disciplinary reading and writing practices.
- 2) In order to meet our qualifying exam requirements we completed the majority of our data analysis independently.

3) Once we had each achieved candidacy, we returned to our overarching research question and data set, offered each other feedback on our work, and synthesized our results for a national audience.

Affordances and Possibilities

Our study gave us an opportunity to learn to collaboratively research a pressing problem in literacy education. Our approach also helped us develop familiarity with a range of research methods and expertise in a subset of methods. Our facility with multiple research methods was supported in part through our need to teach one another about the methods that we each brought to our shared work.

But, it also did more. Our experience showed us a new possibility for doctoral training that has the potential to be successful in many institutional contexts in which literacy education doctoral students design and complete research studies. In particular, we think that our model could be adapted for use by students conducting their dissertations to great effect. We envision graduate students working together to identify a pressing problem in education, each conducting a dissertation-level research project to study a meaningful slice of the problem, and then synthesizing their findings in order to respond to that larger problem. Such

a model could open up what is possible both in terms of 1) the eventual claims that can be made and 2) the learning opportunities that are afforded to novice researchers through the process. Doctoral students would learn how to collaboratively seek answers to the big questions in education research while learning how to design research studies that are aligned and appropriately scaled; they would also deeply learn a specific set of methods while gaining appreciation for and knowledge of other methods.

Of course, such a model may have its challenges. Conflict could surely arise out of epistemological differences, although we think that graduate school is exactly the place to learn to understand and work across epistemological stances. Conflict could also come out of the need to ensure that the intellectual property each individual generates is their own, both for demonstrating one's individual competency in the program and for the need to develop one's own professional identities in the broader research community. Our experience indicates that these potential challenges are not insurmountable and they may actually present helpful occasions for continued learning and growth.

In sum, we urge others to consider ways that doctoral students may conduct research collaboratively within existing structures of doctoral education in order to learn to tackle the knottiest problems of literacy

education.

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