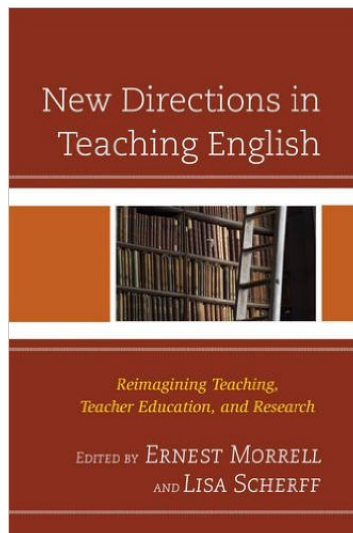


***Review of New Directions in Teaching English:  
Reimagining Teaching,  
Teacher Education, and Research.***

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Morrell, E. & Scherff, L. (2015). *New directions in teaching English: Reimagining teaching, teacher education, and research*. New York: Roman & Littlefield.

ISBN: 978-1610486767

Pages: 220

In *New Directions in Teaching English*, Morrell and Scherff (2015) tackle the question, “What does it mean to be an English educator in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?” (p. 52). As an English teacher educator, I hoped the book would offer a vision for English teaching at the intersection of my three worlds: my world as a former high school English teacher, my role as a teacher of undergraduate pre-service teachers, and my work as a doctoral student and researcher of language and literacy in education. This edited collection, which includes scholarship from the viewpoint of teachers, teacher-educators, and scholars, certainly did not disappoint. The authors offer an energizing purpose for English education—“critical literacy in which young people gain a set of skills that allow them to become more able, discerning, and empowered consumers of text” (p. xiii)—but they bring forth this purpose by weaving together voices from various vantage points in English Education. Thus the book’s greatest strength is a vision of English Education that includes many stakeholders.

The book is organized into three major sections—the perspectives of classroom teachers, teacher-educators, and language and literacy researchers—with each section comprised of individually authored chapters. Collectively, these chapters explore culturally relevant teaching for diverse student populations, the teaching of English for multilingual students, and the teaching of language and literacy skills in the digital media age, all of which important and necessary issues the 21<sup>st</sup> century educator must address. Despite this incredible range, the book maintains cohesion because all authors featured envision youth and teachers who shape and sustain their communities through various and diverse literacies, and the constant connection to real world purposes makes this an energizing read.

In the first and most developed section, teachers offer an account of what is working in their specific classroom contexts and point out challenges that lie ahead. As a teacher researcher, I often read research that focuses on aspects of education that need to be improved or that offers hypothetical solutions, so I found these chapters especially refreshing for their focus on concrete, real examples of things that are going right in classroom teaching already. Furthermore, the strategies described could be modified to fit the needs of any teacher reading it who wishes to enact the same kind of strategy in his or her own classroom, making this section both practical and a wonderful reminder of teachers who do amazing work every day.

For example, in Chapter One, Coffey describes her classroom unit in which students analyzed and explored multiple texts in order to arrive at their own definitions of what it means to be a *warrior-scholar*. Her unit highlights ways in which teachers can engage and motivate students with relevant material that is linked to real-world purposes, in this case helping students to find agency through literacy for the purpose of transforming their communities.

Fiallos (Chapter Two) offers another example of how culturally relevant teaching motivates and engages students, connecting their out-of-school literacies to the classroom by asking students to design their own musical soundtracks and engage in a range of writing and production activities from narrative to more traditional thematic analysis to multimodal construction of picture, sound, and description. In both Coffey’s and Fiallos’ chapters, the unit ideas can be used or modified by teachers. More importantly, both highlight a shared purpose of literacy and teaching English: language and literacy skills for liberation and community activism.

In Chapter Three, Garcia focuses specifically on mobile media such as texting, QR codes, email, and other mobile media apps. This chapter is especially important for a teacher like me, who can sometimes be apprehensive about incorporating media that my students know more about than me. Garcia encourages teachers to work to incorporate mobile media in spite of this challenge because the advantages—student engagement through the connection to immediate and real audiences—are too good to pass up. His chapter also illustrates how new directions in the teaching of English require a shift in mindset about the role of teacher authority; moving English teaching forward requires not only a reimagining of content but also a reimagining of the role teachers play in helping students develop literacies that they already use in their everyday lives. At the end of this chapter, I have more questions about how teachers might navigate a new role that asks them to flatten some of their authority and allow students to drive knowledge and inquiry in the classroom. In what ways can teachers help students to know that their expertise, especially around mobile media, is just as valued at the teacher's? How will teachers negotiate the tension between a traditional expected role of authority and the new pedagogical role as co-constructor of knowledge with students? A classroom where student and teacher are both involved in learning toward shared goals excites me, but also marks a new direction for teacher roles, thus the need for new understandings of how teachers navigate those roles.

While Chapters Four and Five offer less concrete strategies that teachers might use or modify in their own classrooms, Johnson and Winn, along with Martinez, contribute important counternarratives about the literacy practices of young black and Latino/a men and women. Johnson and Winn give us the voices of three young black men as they describe classroom experiences

that were meaningful for them as well as experiences that failed to engage them. The narratives of Jeremy, Donovan, and Caesar reiterate the themes of the three previous chapters by emphasizing that engagement and purpose are key factors in whether or not students find schoolwork meaningful. This chapter also adds the voices of students themselves into the discussion of teaching English, a necessary contribution given that teachers, teacher educators, and teacher researchers are all already included.

In the same vein, Martinez also provides a narrative about black and Latino/a youth that runs counter to the ubiquitous deficit perspective narratives in literacy education. His close discourse analysis of classroom interactions reveals how youth exhibit considerable language dexterity, switching among Englishes depending on context. Martinez's chapter argues not just for a broadening of what counts as literacy in English education classes, but also of what counts as language. Such an expansion of what counts as language allows for students to bring in the knowledge they possess and grow that knowledge to reach more audiences and make a greater impact on the communities that matter to them.

Taken together, these five chapters highlight a vision for teachers and students engaging with literacy and literacy learning in the twenty-first century in which literacy is linked to student interest and purposes. I appreciated these five chapters for their portrayal of what *is* working, especially because in my own teaching career I sometimes felt overwhelmed by the demands of my work to the point where I made excuses for why I did not have the time or resources to be the kind of teacher I imagined I could be. Such resignation was the primary reason I was likely to sometimes slip into teaching in ways I had been taught instead of pursuing the collaborative

approach to literacy that I felt was more beneficial to student learning. The portrayal of teachers in these five chapters indicates that we as teachers have no excuses for not embarking on meaningful literacy pedagogy with students. These teachers are doing it, and they are offering examples from which we as readers can build.

Appropriately, at the end of this section the book shifts from its focus on successful classrooms and the teachers and students in them to *how* English educators might begin to help pre-service teachers to develop pedagogy and become teachers like the ones sketched in the preceding section. While this section only contains three chapters, and is perhaps less comprehensive than the previous section, at least Morrell and Scherff (2015) try to take what they know about what works in classrooms and include voices of scholars who can offer up strategies for helping teacher educators to share this vision of classroom teaching with future teachers. I think this area of English Education needs even more attention, and craved a few more chapters in this section, but was nonetheless relieved that the book did not simply provide a vision for teaching without offering possibilities for how teacher educators might help a new generation to get there.

In Chapter Six, Scherff opens the section by describing a third space service learning environment in which pre-service teachers get a chance to engage with students in a less formal space than the typical classroom. Scherff emphasizes how third-space experiences can help pre-service teachers adjust their deficit thinking and better recognize the literacies students use in their everyday lives. This example of how third-spaces influence pre-service teachers' conceptions of students and literacies was a good reminder that I should not limit my pre-service teacher's opportunities to classrooms and made me thinking about

opportunities for my students to engage with youth at local libraries or in community groups. Scherff's experiences with the pre-service teachers in this third space also highlights how context shapes learning for those who are learning to teach.

Rush (Chapter Seven) extends the discussion of the importance of context as she describes her role as the only English Teacher Educator in the state of Wyoming. The rural context of the schools in the state influence the way she approaches teaching pre-service teachers. Rush emphasizes the importance of pre-service teachers understanding the community of the students they will teach, something I need to help my own students do so that they may work with student to sustain the culture of those communities.

In the final chapter of the section on pre-service teachers, Miller (Chapter Eight) details his approach to helping preservice teachers consider their own histories and communities as well as the histories and communities of their students with hopes of raising pre-service teachers awareness of social justice issues in education. Miller provides an example of an "equity audit" assignment (p. 112) in which pre-service teachers conduct in-depth research of a school in order to unpack a geo-history of the place. I like the assignment so much that I'm having my preservice teachers enact it in hopes that they will learn more about the history and community of their specific teaching contexts, specifically in regards to how equity has or has not been present.

While this middle section from English Educators is shorter than the previous section from teachers, it begins to offer ideas of how new ways for teaching English can be part of teacher preparation programs, something that's particularly important to me right now as an instructor for pre-service teachers who will enter the profession in the

next year. It also touches on a major challenge I face as an English educator: I must prepare pre-service teachers to teach literacy for and in a wide range of contexts. Furthermore, since literacy that empowers students connects them to their personal purposes and community, I must prepare pre-service teachers to teach in ways that help students sustain and transform communities without knowing fully which communities these teachers will be working with and in. While these three authors offer some starting points, I think ultimately the difference in the two sections shows that in general the field knows more about what is going right in classrooms than about helping preservice teachers get there.

The third section of the book explores the role of research in achieving the vision for English teaching and English teacher education set forth in the first two sections. Once again, this section is less developed than the first, indicating that perhaps one new direction for English teaching would be to increase what English educators and researchers know about how to connect research on literacy to the practice of it. Nonetheless, it's refreshing that Morrell and Scherff did not shy away from the challenge of showing how research is and should be connected to the teaching of English.

In Chapter Nine, Lewis and Causey continue to address the importance of connecting literacy to students' lives, specifically their "sociopolitical contexts" (p. 124). They describe their own research of how students are able to use technology as a form of critical engagement through DigMe, a program that focus on interdisciplinary study and critical literacy.

In Chapter Eleven, Groenke and Laughter imagine the English classroom as a place where students can "unmask how power relations work" (p. 157). The chapter

explores both the benefits of pre-service teachers doing action research in classrooms and what happens when one of those teachers gets his or her own classroom and has to work to combat homophobia. In my own teaching, I often experienced conflict between the way I imagined lessons surrounding controversial issues and the reality of how students responded in the actual moment. Groenke and Laughter's chapter highlights a practical way to help teachers focus on these tense moments and respond to them in meaningful ways.

Finally, Patricia Stock (in Chapter Twelve) explains the positive impact practitioner research can have on practice by detailing a teacher inquiry workshop she held on multimedia in the literacy classroom. Through their experience in the workshop, teachers were able to explore what books and activities engaged students in reading and consider how the information would impact their pedagogy. This and the other three chapters from researchers are just a start in exploring how research can help inform practice in both English and preservice teacher classroom, but it is certainly a start in the right direction, toward classrooms that look like the five detailed in the opening chapters of the book.

I think this book provides meaningful engagement with what it means to work toward a possible future of what English teaching could be: it offers a look at real classrooms and what is going right inside them, which gives teachers who are looking to reinvigorate their pedagogy a good place to start; it offers ideas for teacher educators who are hoping to help tomorrow's teachers imagine and reimagine a pedagogy that will better serve America's youth; and finally, the book speaks to the role of research in realizing the purpose and vision of English Education that the book promotes throughout. The common denominator in all

of these positive literacy experiences remains that the literacy students use in school does not exist in a vacuum—teachers, pre-services teachers, teacher educators, and education researchers can indeed link literacy teaching to real-world purposes for the use of those same literacies, helping students to become agents of change in their own lives. I finished the book excited to get up the next day and step into my classroom with preservice teachers. I would certainly put this book on my syllabus.