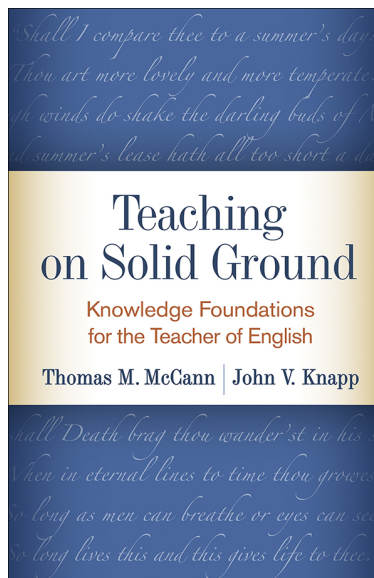


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Review of Teaching on Solid Ground: Knowledge Foundations for the teacher of English By Thomas M. McCann and John V. Knapp

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Overview

Teaching on Solid Ground: Knowledge Foundations for the Teacher of English by Thomas M. McCann and John V. Knapp (2019) is a call to English teachers and teacher educators to deeply consider what English teachers should know and be able to do. The authors acknowledge that the “presumption of what every English teacher should know is a healthy provocation” (p. 2) that is intended to promote reflection of the single reader and debate among a group of readers in a teacher education program or teachers’ lounge. Indeed, this book provokes. While it is not a methods book, it does offer a vision of expertise that troubles the image of English teachers who maintain “dazzling bulletin boards,” “participate enthusiastically in committee meetings,” and “may have completed relatively few upper-level literature, language, or composition courses at the university and profess many misconceptions about the discipline of literature and language study” (p. 5).

This book is based on McCann and Knapp’s extensive experience as U.S.-based classroom teachers, researchers, and teacher educators who have witnessed many teacher candidates in action. Therefore, a real strength of the book is how McCann and Knapp, over 7 chapters, uncover the complexity of an English teacher’s job: the significant responsibility for knowledge and expertise across the territory of literature, writing, oral discourse, and language demands. However, for a teacher to have deep content knowledge in all four territories, especially as an early career teacher, is a formidable order. English teachers also tend to value some territories over others. In Appendix A, “What Is the ‘Business’ of Teaching English? Profiles of English Teachers in Action,” the authors invite teachers to reflect on several profiles of high school English teachers. Conceived as teachers discussed in the same school, the authors illustrate English teachers with their own visions of teaching high school English. Among others, Camille, one of the teachers, believes her job is to “tell the story of American literature” using the assigned anthology; Carolyn is committed to conventions of “standard English”; and Sean is “determined to expand

students’ knowledge of the world” with global literature and social justice projects (p. 160). The knowledge a teacher has about the discipline impacts “how they plan and facilitate instruction and interact with learners” (p. 9). Is there a “right” way? Can there be a common foundation of knowledge given diverse philosophies of “what the endeavor of teaching English is all about” (p. 6)?

Teaching on Solid Ground leads a conversation about what English teachers must know deeply in order to not merely transmit knowledge but to develop instructional units that ethically integrate these territories with a constructivist approach. McCann and Knapp frame much of the book around Shulman’s (1987) idea of *pedagogical content knowledge* as “that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers” (p. 8).

In this review, I first provide a synopsis of each chapter. Then, I discuss the implications of McCann and Knapp’s work with pedagogical content knowledge, especially for teacher educators. I conclude by summarizing my critique and make suggestions for future work in English education.

Chapter Synopses

Chapter 1, “Knowing the Territory of Literature,” begins the provocation with a healthy “tongue-in-cheek” debate about what English teachers should read and teach (p. 17). McCann and Knapp clearly agree that the expert English teachers should read much more than they will ever read with students in order to have a deep understanding of the vast territory that they are teaching students to navigate. Having read the past greats in literature, English teachers understand why readers require support from “someone more knowledgeable to guide the emerging reader in understanding characters they might not automatically like, especially those from an unknown or alien universe” (p. 15). Furthermore, the authors charge the English teachers with being able to “distinguish between quality literature that challenges their minds and emotions from

predictable and gratuitous pulp” (p. 9). The word “pulp,” a provocation, implies the teacher has read deeply in genre, form, and time period (including young adult literature) and is inviting students to read widely in order to be able to make a principled judgment of such: “How a group of learners and their teachers talk about a text and *what* they talk about sets the priorities and reveals a teacher’s conception of how students learn about literature” (p. 17). If the teacher does not know of the tradition and does not have a rich reading life, then the decisions a teacher or department makes about what students read is not informed nor based on knowledge of all the options to decipher what will nurture a rich literary life for their students.

Without the background and expertise in the territory of literature, the teacher would not be able to layer texts, uncover nuances within passages, expand thinking across genres and forms. Thus, if teachers are experts in tradition and familiar with contemporary publications and modes of reading, then they will always be informed enough to make decisions, especially how storytelling changes and is impacted with new literacies/technologies.

Chapter 2, “Teaching in the Territory of Literature,” extends the debate of what English teachers should read with students to how they should teach literature. McCann and Knapp write:

Occasionally, Freytag’s pyramid raises its ugly head; or simplistic character charts; or worksheets that prompt learners to categorize characters as round or flat and conflicts as man versus man, man vs. nature, or man versus self. We also occasionally see worksheets that prompt learners to record text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections, as if these were free standing connections and the exhaustive representations of transactions within literature. (p. 36)

The authors caution against methods that reduce the complexity of literature to measurable ways of knowing and encourage English teachers to “organize and structure experiences so that learners

can command procedures and be aware of how they made sense and judgements from the texts they have read” (p. 38). A very real struggle for English teachers is how to support students as they puzzle through a complex literary text:

Perhaps the saddest and least productive set of coping mechanisms some teachers have adapted to some students’ resistance to reading complex literary texts is to laden the learners with reading guides, graphic organizers, recitations, and objective quizzes, as if these conventional attempts at “accountability” should encourage students to read assigned texts. (p. 39)

Chapter 3, “The Territory of Writing: What Makes for Good Writing?” shifts the territory to writing to consider what is “good” writing and how do English teachers get to that standard. This is the first chapter title that ends in a question mark partly because

English teachers often report that they come to their university preparation...admire good writing, but the kind of writing that they admire is neither the kind of writing they are expected to do themselves nor that they will prompt their own students to produce. (p. 63)

As in Chapter 1, the authors advocate “broad experience with various kinds of writing and discourse communities” in order to recognize such (p. 61). McCann shares an example of writing about literature as a student in Knapp’s 1971 class:

John had a requirement for each writing assignment---that each student meet him for a conference about the writing. The idea of the conference was not to move the current composition from a draft to a more refined version, but to review what had already been written and graded in order to learn how to improve on the next attempt. (p. 60)

The authors caution against the use of rubrics in gauging what is “good” in writing.

In Chapter 4, “The Territory of Writing: How Can We Facilitate Growth?” McCann and Knapp illuminate dimensions of process writing. Teachers think about process in different ways. The natural process of writer development is with students’ choices. The teacher does not interfere with the writer’s process. The structured process implies a sequence of learning experiences for specific kinds of writing to develop a repertoire of writing. The authors eschew formulas and advocate for lots of peer interactions before drafting beings:

Of course, if a teacher is going to *teach* writing instead of merely *assigning* and *assessing* writing, she will need to know something about the process involved in composing any text and the procedures that students will have to learn in order to generate their own text. (p. 80)

In response to the use of mentor texts in writing instruction, the authors suggest that an instructional approach emphasizing mentor texts values the finished product over the process and “does little to reveal the thinking, problem-solving, or decision-making procedures that a writer follows in order to generate texts” (p.81). Above all, this chapter emphasizes a writer’s agency. McCann and Knapp suggest Hillock’s *inquiry* in an *environmental* mode: “A teacher taking an inquiry stance would have specific learning targets in mind. That is, the teacher would presume to set a learning agenda based on her understanding of students’ current proficiencies and needs for development” (p. 89).

Chapter 5, “The Territory of Oral Discourse,” explores the landscape of speaking and listening in the English classroom. Speaking is so much more than formal speeches for McCann and Knapp who write:

At a minimum, teachers of English need to know how to foster a classroom environment in which adolescents have the confidence to interact with each other and recognize a sense of agency to advance their own ideas, even when those ideas run counter to the

teacher’s position and invite opposition from peers. (p.109)

Of course, literary discussions have always been an essential element of the English classroom, but attending to a variety of language experiences can enrich learning and deepen classroom community. The authors offer a series of questions in the section “Implications for Teacher Development” to encourage teachers to look for ways to “move away from teacher-dominated discourse,” “help students to follow processes similar to those they use for written composition as the research and construct texts...for public speaking,” and plan strategically to vary speech activities (p. 118).

In Chapter 6, “The Territory of Language: What Do We Teach When We Teach Language?” articulates three values: language and identity, language as an element of writing instruction, and how knowledge about language assists the teacher and the learner in the close reading of texts. McCann and Knapp suggest that English teachers should identify and teach high priority concepts for the context of the writing they are doing with students. Even though formal grammar instruction continues in English classrooms across the country, it has “failed to produce significant writing improvement” (Noguchi, p. 128). Correcting grammar and usage ignores how closely language is tied to identity. English teachers must understand that “presumed ‘rules’ for correctness are simply a matter of agreement among a power elite and often violated by the guardians of correctness themselves” (McCann & Knapp, 2019, p. 144). Thus, this chapter encourages English teachers to, once again, be knowledgeable about language study, including the limited impact of formal grammar instruction and how variants of language use define identity.

Finally, Chapter 7, “What English Teachers Should Know,” closes the book with a summary of what English teachers should know. Clearly, teaching English is so much more than transmitting information, keeping kids in line, and “dazzling bulletin boards.” An English teacher makes so many decisions: from setting learning goals to constructing units, from designing activities to

assessing understanding. Still, even knowledge in the four territories is not sufficient if the teacher does not understand the interplay of the content, learners, and context of learning. McCann and Knapp go so far as to say there needs to “expertise” in content and pedagogical content knowledge while acknowledging directly that “this book is debatable” (p. 156). A philosophy of English education will privilege certain content and methods, and a teacher’s identity and training will as well, so in every chapter there is a lot to debate. In the end, however, McCann and Knapp do not waver in their belief that whatever decisions teachers make in what and how they teach English, such decisions must be informed, and that comes from broad, deep knowledge within literature, writing, oral discourse, and language.

Discussion and Implications

McCann and Knapp’s provocative question of what English teacher should know comes from their great concern of what they are not seeing in teacher practice but what they recognize as experienced practitioners. They discourage prescriptive approaches to teaching grammar, value process and support students’ efforts about issues critical to their lives, tread carefully with “correct” and “standard” English, and welcome digital literacies integrated and “new literacies” such as film and graphic novels. Still, the authors navigate most of the “oughts” with thoughtful skepticism. Each chapter ends with “Your Thoughts,” a section inviting conversation and self-reflection.

Teaching on Solid Ground is for teachers, and I suspect teacher educators will find it of value in rethinking current course syllabi to nurture greater consciousness of pedagogical knowledge—knowledge of content and knowledge and practice of teaching. What is the role of the English education program in preparing teachers for this work? What is the responsibility of teachers and the schools they serve to continue that work? As a book reviewer and teacher educator, I ask these questions that need continuous consideration. Although not necessarily its aim, much of the book and its appendices work as a methods text in its framing of

English in these broad categories of literature, writing, oral discourse, and language. Indeed, pre and in-service teachers navigate questions of “ought” every day, especially when the English department or school district is mandating use of an adopted textbook, scripted writing program, and/or common grade-level assessments. However, McCann and Knapp are calling for teachers to have truly rich knowledge in all four territories in order to be able to navigate, enhance, stretch, and modify any mandate to offer students a meaningful English education.

One section that certainly got me debating the authors was in the “territory of literature,” which focuses mostly on white, male canonical texts. I hope readers will consider how our discipline can disrupt the dominant texts perpetuating systemic gender, sexuality, age, religion, ability, language, class, and race disparity in the English classroom. The canon never represented all of America and teachers are in a position to shape a new canon. McCann and Knapp narrate this book from their experiences as teachers and teacher educators. However, they are honest about their preferences and admit,

[W]e disagree about the specific titles and authors a teacher should have read: where Tom is eclectic, John is more of a traditionalist. However, we do agree that an English teacher should read broadly, and in doing so, encourage students to expand their knowledge base and literacy experience. (p. 148)

Still, I would go further to suggest that teachers must be a part of a broad community of teachers and scholars to ensure that their reading lives are dynamic and responsive throughout their careers.

While “territories” offer a useful frame for this book, what seems to be missing is that deep knowledge does not necessarily come from teacher preparation courses or from content study but from practice, from actually teaching many students and learning how a wide range of students engage with and make meaning from content and experiences. To be able

to draw from “knowledge foundations” takes keen observation as a teacher and requires an understanding of how assessment and lesson planning (and revising) must be responsive. To be a responsive teacher, the teacher must recognize what is happening and respond to clarify, review, stretch, or scrap plans entirely. This book leads its readers to think about how teacher education programs could do more of this practice. How can teacher mentors and English educators follow teachers into their practice and co-teach on site? What about professional development in the “territories” years into practice to reinforce the “solid ground”?

My main hope for future work in this realm of pedagogical knowledge by McCann, Knapp, and others is further engagement with and ongoing conversations about *how* teacher education programs and schools can support and encourage pedagogical content knowledge development with English teachers working in schools and alternative settings across the globe. This book brings forth and builds on the difference between content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge. Nonetheless, knowing the learner and the school culture is fundamental to pedagogical knowledge, and this knowledge takes time.

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