

## **Are Edited Books in Language and Literacy Education a Graveyard for Good Thinking?**

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Can we stop with all the edited books, already?

I recently scrolled through social media, hoping for something uplifting in a time of seemingly endless bad news (post 2020 election). Oh, neat, a colleague announced that their edited volume was officially, as of that date, published. The post featured an obligatory picture with the book cover and a picture of the table of contents. I wanted to feel happy for the scholar-editor and for the contributors, and while I was genuinely excited about the volume's focus and was especially interested in some of the individual chapters, I questioned whether these edited volumes are really worth the time and effort our field is putting into them. Should language and literacy education continue supporting or championing such academic works?

In interest of full disclosure, I am a frequent offender of publishing chapters in edited volumes offered by recognized purveyors of such: Brill, Emerald, Information Age, National Council of Teachers of English, Palgrave McMillan, Peter Lang, Routledge, Rowman and Littlefield, Sense. I have even edited a couple such tomes and have another one under review as I type this admittedly contrarian piece about them. I have posted the obligatory photos on social media. I have celebrated their arrival in the world. My mom was stoked. Frankly, I feel as though some of my best writing appears in the unconstrained spaces of edited volumes where I have stretched my writing legs and allowed my imagination as a writer to get carried away, certainly a freeing experience in the otherwise stoic world of writing in academe.

Please do not misunderstand me, there is merit in edited volumes. For one, each time I have written a chapter for one I have learned stuff. Having a job where part of it necessitates getting paid to learn stuff is truly a privilege, one for which I am quite thankful. Two, edited books can be an ideal training ground, so to speak, an opportunity to explore and combine ideas

in new and interesting ways, sometimes then undergirding research articles that appear in our field. Three, certainly some edited volumes transcend the variety of limitations and are venerable parts of the field—all are not created or consumed equally.

More and more though, my experiences tend to agree with Dorothy Bishop (2012), who suggested, “quite simply, if you write a chapter for an edited book, you might as well write the paper and then bury it in a hole in the ground.” Paul Silvia, celebrated writer of *How to Write a Lot* and prolific psychology scholar publicly states on his university website, “I decline nearly all invitations to write for edited books.”

I recently returned to my faculty office following a long COVID sabbatical to find a yearly royalty statement from the publisher of my most recent edited volume *Critical Media Literacy and Fake News in Post-Truth America*. The book received local and national press, reviews in a national journal, an international award, a buzz on social media, and featured author contributors I genuinely look up to. For all sakes and purposes, this check could/should have been huge, at least as far as academic book royalty checks go (enough to buy a nice dinner for the family that suffered while such a work was completed). Instead, I loaded up the family in our minivan and drove straight to McDonald’s.

Other than the size of my stomach or wallet, the real question of impact that concerns us as language and literacy scholars is whether anyone is reading the work we publish, and whether it is doing any real or imagined good in the world. In the case of my recent book, nine scholars have cited it to date<sup>1</sup> according to Google Scholar. Leaders of the field like Peter Smagorinsky have nine citations by breakfast each morning. To date, Peter has published 66 chapter contributions to edited volumes, 38 of which garnered 444 citations. Their average chapter citation rate is 6.7. His average article citation rate of his top 38 articles is 174.5. As many of us do, I certainly look up to Peter and deeply appreciate his guidance and leadership in the field. To date, and not counting my own co-edited books, the individual book chapter contributions I have made in the field (23) well

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<sup>1</sup>Data from Google Scholar was accessed on 1-11/2021 when this piece was originally written. While some numbers have changed since then, the point being made here is not about specific numbers thus I elected to leave those original calculations in place.

out number their cumulative citations (15). Naturally, citations are a limited and limiting manner of understanding readership, impact, or importance of a work.

So, is anyone reading these edited volumes and what, if any, purpose are they serving? I am going to generalize and assert that our colleagues are not reading them. They are not reading mine, not yours, and not the latest one that splashed on social media. With few exceptions, the award-winning books are not being read, nor are the ones with complimentary reviews in established journals. So, what is the point? Are these edited books mainly needed to advance our careers and do they, in the process of that, ultimately cost the field advances of its own? Sage advice I received once from a senior scholar urged me to “never put my best ideas in a book chapter.” Should future promotion and tenure committees and external review letter writers ignore contributions to edited volumes? I am going way out on a self-defeating limb here to say that—unless something changes—the field should move purposefully away from paying attention to edited books, a moratorium until further notice. In fact, one could argue that the field has already done precisely that.

And please remember, I am throwing stones in a glass house—the windows in my ivory tower are shattering all around me. I am supposed to be working on a contribution for an edited volume instead of this piece and have another due in three months, not to mention the volume I am co-editing. Maybe the moratorium can start after I finish these projects to which I am committed? Or maybe there is a way forward? I do not claim to know everything about our field or understand all about this topic. I feel 100% confident in saying that there is a problem, that these works are not currently making it into the conversations in our field, and that something must change. Akin to the problem with book chapters/edited books, which is admittedly not new, is the larger issue of publication proliferation and the information overload we all experience.

In hopes of sparking some of that change or at least bringing awareness to this issue, I have collected three possible ways forward:

- 1) We could simply stop the presses by ceasing to recognize or celebrate these publications. Are these edited volumes playing a role in inflating scholarly output? They certainly have done exactly that for

me and there is no doubt in my mind that they have helped move my career forward. Looking back at the last 15 years, I can frankly and unequivocally say that my scholarly record would be in a different, better place had I not reached as often for the fruit hanging from lower branches—the edited volumes—instead focusing on writing journal articles. If I had published half as much but remained focused on better venues, I would either feel better about said scholarly record or I would not have progressed in this field and would, if I were lucky, instead be selling Chevrolets for my brother.

- 2) Another option would be to take on the sharing of edited volumes in a centralized fashion. Creating a searchable digital library where all authors and editors are encouraged to list and link their works could be a repository for the good thinking happening in edited volumes in our field and serve as a landing place for researchers. This would introduce the sticky question of money into the equation. How would publishing companies respond, and are they truly profiting on books in our field? Many presses already offer the authors of chapters the chance to share their pre-final copy works in places like ResearchGate, Academia.edu, personal websites, or an online repository associated with one's university/college. So, some people share their chapters publicly and others are locked behind a paywall; whatever the case, it serves to diffuse and make less effective (or impactful) the work many of us are doing. I have noticed and appreciate that, for example, *English Education* started a book review section on its website to accompany *JoLLE* and *Teachers College Record* as visible journals that review books.
- 3) What if we just took over this industry and instead of the litany of places offering edited volumes, we initiated the English Language Arts and Literacy Education Press and began publishing a set number of edited volumes per year, each completely accessible and searchable, appearing in databases free of charge? Print on demand capability would be nice but these would first and foremost exist digitally. I am sure our field is blessed with all the talent and motivation to enact such a large goal.

So, what will it be, dear colleagues? A moratorium, a hostile takeover, or somewhere in between? Tell me, how does an edited volume breakthrough

and make a contribution? I do not like to give the advice (to myself or others) that our best work should not appear in edited volumes. I have also seen firsthand the incredible amount of good these types of writing experiences do for junior scholars and classroom teachers. Edited volumes open conversations that might not otherwise be possible and thus nurture scholars and scholarship along the way. They continue to do good for me too, and I would love to find ways to make them more helpful to our field. Examining these issues through research could be a way forward as my thoughts here are informal and editorial in nature. While such an examination is not anything near the top of my interests, I would have time to contribute if I did not just sign up to write another book chapter.

## References

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