REVIEW ESSAY

EXAMINING TEACHER INQUIRY INTO LITERACY: EPISTEMOLOGICAL, TELEOLOGICAL, AND EXPERIENTIAL TENSIONS

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Denstaedt, Linda, Laura Jane Roop, and Stephen Best. *Doing and Making Authentic Literacies.* **Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2014. 139 pages. $33.95 (non-member price) $24.95 (member price). ISBN 978-0-814112199. Print.**

Filkins, Scott. *Beyond Standardized Truth: Improving Teaching and Learning through Inquiry-Based Reading Assessment.* **Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2012. 133 pages. $33.95 (non-member price) $24.95 (member price). ISBN 9780814102916.**

Lattimer, Heather. *Real-World Literacies: Disciplinary Teaching in the High School Classroom.* **Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2014. 159 pages. $33.95 (non-member price) $24.95 (member price). ISBN 9780814139431. Print.**

Linda Denstaedt, Laure Jane Roop, and Stephen Best's *Doing and Making Authentic Literacies*, Scott Filkins' *Beyond Standardized Truth: Improving Teaching and Learning through Inquiry-Based Reading*

Assessment, and Heather Lattimer's *Real-World Literacies: Disciplinary Teaching in the High School Classroom* are part of the "Principles in Practice" imprint of the National Council of the Teachers of English (NCTE), a series that endeavors to "offer [K-12] teachers concrete illustrations of effective classroom practices based in NCTE research briefs and policy statements" ("Principles in Practice Books"). Collectively, the writers inhabit that complex nexus of national professional organizations, state and federal policy, university-based research, testing and curriculum corporations, local communities, school districts, and individual classrooms.

Mediating among these various stakeholders is not a simple task though, and navigating the tensions among the stakeholders' commitments requires considerable effort. The authors undertake this task to increase practitioner accessibility to and application of literacy research, policy, and theory. In particular, the authors seek to support literacy teachers in reimagining their own professional practices in ways that can contribute to schooling becoming more relevant and socially just. To encourage uptake of their suggestions, each of the authors, to varying degrees, advocates for teachers to become involved in inquiry communities as sources of support, knowledge, and institutional advocacy weight. This teacher inquiry stance becomes a resource for educators as they negotiate the tensions of working *within*, *on*, and *against* hegemonic schooling practices.

In this essay, I unpack several of these tensions to explore the affordances and constraints of these texts for their audiences of K-12 teachers. Specifically, I discuss three tensions in working within, on, and against hegemonic schooling practices through a teacher inquiry stance: epistemological tensions surrounding expertise and knowledge; teleological tensions about socially just schooling; and experiential tensions of (un)certainty and (dis)comfort. To lay the groundwork for this more detailed analysis, I first provide an overview of the three books.

NCTE's Principles in Practice Imprint

NCTE's "Principles in Practice" imprint as a whole supports practitioners, specifically K-12 classroom teachers, in understanding key ideas from organizational research briefs and policy statements in ways that encourage them to reflect on and subsequently revise their own teaching practices. The book series foregrounds narrative summaries of actual classroom events and employs "practical, teacher friendly language" ("Principles in Practice"). In this way, it seeks to demonstrate, and even bring to life, the principles outlined in official NCTE documents. The imprint has multiple strands, such as one for adolescent literacy, and spans multiple age and grade levels. The books featured in this essay represent two of the strands and high school ages (grades 9-12).

Denstaedt, Roop, and Best 's and Lattimer's books are part of the "Literacies of the Disciplines" strand, which draws on NCTE's policy research brief "Literacies *of* Disciplines" (reprinted as a preface in both books). In this brief and in both books, literacy is understood to be plural and situated, existing as "a set of multi-faceted social practices that are shaped by contexts, participants, and technologies" (Lattimer xi). Disciplines, which are not synonymous with but are related to high school content areas, are understood as sites of knowledge creation that have "flexible and porous" boundaries (Lattimer xi). Denstaedt, Roop, and Best and Lattimer offer portraits of high school teachers from a number of content areas (such as English language arts, biology, construction, and algebra). These teachers foreground disciplinary literacies in their classrooms in ways that the authors characterize as "authentic" and "real-world," terms that they equate with literacy practices that are valued in the economy, post-secondary schooling, and/or career training setting. Through their descriptions of exemplar classrooms, the authors provide concrete tools and best practices for employing disciplinary literacies in their teaching.

Linda Denstaedt, Laure Jane Roop, and Stephen Best's
Doing and Making Authentic Literacies

Denstaedt, Roop, and Best, for instance, outline a method that practitioners can employ to move forward on a continuum away from merely "doing school" to "doing the discipline" in ways that involve students in "authentic" doing and making practices (28). For them, teaching practices enact authentic disciplinary work when they "situat[e] students as experts while they construct new knowledge and create a product or performance" (15), a situation in which students have decision-making authority, experience accountability, and have audiences beyond the school site. The authors suggest five concrete steps teachers can follow to engage in authentic disciplinary work:

1. See development of authentic literacies as a continuum.
2. Identify and value disciplinary habits, tools, and processes.
3. Engage in substantive conversations around rigorous disciplinary tasks and ideas.
4. Engage in kidwatching and formative assessment.
5. Develop partnerships to deepen understandings of disciplinary learning. (9)

Each of these five topics is featured in its own chapter. At the end of each of the later chapters, Denstaedt, Roop, and Best suggest questions for "Collegial Conversations" practitioners can use as part of inquiry into their own practice as they attempt to move towards "doing the discipline" (28).

Heather Lattimer's *Real-World Literacies: Disciplinary Teaching in the High School Classroom*

Lattimer conceptualizes teaching disciplinary literacies through the use of inquiry education, project-based learning, and linked (or interdisciplinary) learning. In her introductory chapter, she articulates five foundational characteristics of her approach: authentic purpose and audience; flexible processes and negotiable

structures; teacher as facilitator; access to experts; and student ownership. In the remainder of the book, she illustrates these ideas with a chapter dedicated to each of the major areas of the Common Core State Standards for English language arts (reading, writing, and listening and speaking) and a fourth to assessment. She frames her discussion by showing gaps between employment needs and dominant schooling practices. She then presents and analyzes narrative case studies of exemplar classrooms, extrapolating best practices from the case and connecting to the Common Core State Standards. She closes her book with a postscript offering pragmatic suggestions for teachers to take small steps to implement the ideas from her book, such as becoming involved in an inquiry or professional learning community.

Scott Filkins' *Beyond Standardized Truth: Improving Teaching and Learning through Inquiry-Based Reading Assessment*

Filkins' book is part of the "Literacy Assessment" strand of the "Principles in Practice" imprint. He draws on the IRA-NCTE standards for the assessment of reading and writing (included in his book's preface). The standards' creators understand assessment as interpretive and contextual, meaning it should be premised on inquiry into collective responsibility and change rather than individual accountability and blame. Applying this framework, Filkins argues for a more humane inquiry-based approach to reading assessment that is grounded in the expertise and observations of teachers who understand their students' reading ability via contextualized, principled assessments. He advocates for goal clarity, to guide learning and assessments, paired with strong inquiry questions. Filkins argues that principled classroom-based inquiry approaches to reading assessment are the only method that can provide the rich, complex, and accurate information about students' reading ability. In the remainder of the book, he narrates classroom cases from early and later career high school reading and language arts teachers. In doing so, he outlines an inquiry approach to reading assessment, explores its

possibilities for formative assessment, discusses it as a springboard for teacher inquiry into professional practice, and closes by examining the broader assessment landscape.

Teacher Inquiry

Together, the authors of these three books extend the research and policy work of NCTE by intervening at the level of individual classroom practices. Consequently, although they acknowledge larger trends such as standardization movements and the increasing use of corporate produced curricula, they neither substantially engage with these trends nor directly critique them. Instead, they treat them as givens or inevitabilities of K-12 schooling, encouraging teachers to work *within* these constraints to work *on* their own practices. Nonetheless, the authors recognize the pressures teachers face and attempt to mitigate potential readers' resistance in two ways. First, they emphasize the value of "Start[ing] small" (Lattimer 139) or "giving themselves permission to move slowly" (Denstaedt, Roop, and Best 35). In other words, they understand the pragmatics of doing what can be done. Second, they highlight the importance of teachers collaborating with and supporting one another as they adopt an inquiry stance to understand and improve their classroom practices, even though the explicitness of a teacher inquiry framework varies across the texts. Filkins explicitly uses the language of teacher inquiry and advocates for inquiry groups to gather data systematically to use in advocating with administrators for changes (e.g., 110). Denstaedt, Roop, and Best use the language of "collegial conversations" (e.g., 99) and encourage partnerships and supportive relationships within and across settings. Lattimer advocates for "collaboration" and finding "like-minded teacher colleagues" (137) with whom to share resources and knowledge. Thus, the authors understand that the local implementations of their ideas will always look different and that an inquiry community can be a valuable asset for teachers who attempt such implementations. In encouraging an inquiry stance as part of a process of revising classroom practices, the authors

position teachers as the ones navigating the tensions of working *within*, *on*, and *against* locally hegemonic schooling practices. The authors' choice to position teachers in this way offers teachers certain affordances and constraints.

In this essay, I read these three books through the lens of teacher inquiry to explore these affordances and constraints. However, my choice is one among many, and each choice would foreground different yet important questions. For example, other readers might focus on the question of literacy assessment, a topic threaded throughout each book. Since assessment continues to be a significant political topic and increasingly encompasses evaluations of students, teachers, and schools, such a reading would be of great value. Similarly, other readers might focus on themes of curricular and pedagogical relevancy, a topic the authors consider in, across, and outside of secondary and post-secondary contexts. Since U.S. schools continue to sustain long-standing differences in achievement with respect to race, ethnicity, social class, language, and indigeneity, a reading focused on relevancy would likewise be generative.

My particular choice to employ teacher inquiry as a frame led me to consider questions of knowledge, goals, and experience in each of the books. Undoubtedly, this collection of books has much to offer teachers in these areas, but I argue that the tensions result in significant limitations. I now turn to discuss these tensions, focusing on epistemological tensions surrounding expertise and knowledge, teleological tensions about socially just schooling, and experiential tensions of (un)certainty and (dis)comfort. Exploring these tensions is not merely an exercise in critique, though. They impact the sustained local viability of the authors' alternative schooling visions and the effectiveness of their impact.

Epistemological Tensions

With respect to working within, on and against hegemonic schooling practices, tensions exist in the authors' treatment of epistemology, specifically around who gets to be an expert about what, what knowledges are legitimated, and in what circuits

various expertise and knowledges travel. Each of these three books takes as a central issue and seeks to validate and value the knowledge produced by expert classrooms teachers within a broader sociopolitical context that too often devalues, deskills, and deprofessionalizes teachers individually and collectively. Moreover, valuing teacher expertise and knowledge is a cornerstone of schooling represented by the authors. For instance, Filkins argues that classroom teachers who enact principled and contextualized reading assessments produce nuanced, fine-grained, and timely data regarding student learning that are not and cannot be produced by standardized tests. To illustrate, he contrasts the inability of the ACT reading test data to inform day-to-day classroom instruction (as documented by ACT's 2006 report about its own test) with the contextualized reading formative assessments used by Gary Slotnick, a high school English teacher with whom Filkins worked as an instructional coach. Slotnick's assessments enabled him to shape his future instruction and differentiate in individualized ways. Similarly, Filkins argues that corporate-produced formative assessment and intervention materials can never be as responsive and relevant as those that teachers create for their students.

In this argument, Filkins does not position standardized and teacher knowledges as equals but rather privileges *some* teacher knowledges for *some* purposes. By focusing on teachers' practices as assessors, in some ways Filkins works against dominant standardized testing practices, and particularly their meanings, functions, and import in local school districts. In this vision of schooling, standardized testing groups offer expertise about some components of student performance while teachers taking an inquiry stance on assessment become experts on the unfolding dynamics of contextualized student learning. Filkins' perspective—and similar ones adopted by Denstaedt, Roop, and Best and Lattimer—have enormous value for providing teachers adopting an inquiry stance with research-based grounding for (re)shaping the uptake of standardized and corporate testing and curricula in their schools.

At the same time, this affordance of teacher expertise is in tension with constraints regarding the circuits along which these authors imply this knowledge does (not) travel. While all the authors value the potential for teacher knowledge to shape individual classroom practice and potentially cross-classroom local practices, this expertise doesn't travel further. Standardized and corporate knowledges move across the geospatial boundaries of classrooms, schools, and communities and across time as when data accumulates for students over the arc of their schooling careers. However, teacher knowledge is local and rarely, if ever, translocal. Its pathways are fairly restricted as teachers reproduce dominant knowledges of disciplines such as biology or the "authentic" and "real world" literacies valued in the economy. For example, Lattimer offers an example of disciplinary writing in a chemistry class (73-74) where students drafted research proposals that were then reviewed by scientists and other teachers. While this description certainly appears to be a valuable learning experience, it also involves a one-way flow of information and evaluation, where the discipline is reified as students attempt to emulate other experts rather than value their own individual, local, or cultural knowledges or reshape dominant knowledges.

These tensions regarding the circuits travelled by different expertise and knowledges are echoed in Cochran-Smith and Lytle's discussion in *Inquiry as Stance* of the important differences between the practitioner inquiry movement and professional learning communities (52-59). In their conceptualization, practitioner or teacher inquiry focuses on social movements, multiple contexts of change, and equity outside of the school accountability framework. In contrast, professional learning communities focus on school effects, schools as the unit of change, and equity inside the school accountability framework. It is undoubtedly valuable to work within dominant frameworks of schooling to enact changes in practices that produce change within the unit of the school within its own accountability framework. Revaluing teacher knowledge and expertise—as these authors describe— does so in important ways. However, to stop at these

boundaries positions teacher knowledge as only valid within the particular classroom situation from which it emerged, denying broader possibilities. Simultaneously, it positions other actors, such as corporate curriculum writers or disciplinary experts employed in the economy, as the only actors capable of producing knowledges that travel across more diverse and expansive pathways. These dynamics become reproduced without questioning the shortcomings of these dominant ways of knowing. Over longer time arcs, this tension fails to challenge the dynamics through which local teacher knowledge becomes devalued. It also undermines larger questions of educational justice and equity by failing to evaluate the impact of schooling cultures and practices more broadly beyond their own internal interpretive frames and accountability systems. These epistemological tensions are complicated further by tensions regarding the *telos* (i.e., the ends or goals) of socially just schooling perspectives, which I discuss next.

Teleological Tensions

With respect to working within, on and against hegemonic schooling practices, tensions inform the authors' consideration of the ends or goals of socially just schooling. Importantly, these authors all frame their arguments via social justice, although the language they use varies. To illustrate, Denstaedt, Roop, and Best close their book with an appeal for teachers to adopt an authentic disciplinary literacies approach to intervene in an "incredibly leaky" (115) high school to college pipeline that results in wasted lives, which has both a human and a societal cost. Here, they seek to intercede in differential achievement rates both in the immediate context of schooling and in the longitudinal context of employment. There are long-standing and valuable arguments for more explicitly teaching students, especially those from historically marginalized communities, the knowledges and languages of power and privilege (e.g., Delpit; Lee; Gay). Such arguments resonate with the stance of Denstaedt, Roop, and Best, and they are necessary interventions. In this way, these three texts

offer teachers resources for pedagogies and curricula that are more relevant, accessible, and socially just.

Yet, while the end goals of providing more effective instruction or more effective preparation for the workforce are both laudable, teachers face constraints when such goals are the only ones articulated as desirable and possible. Immediately, the reduction of schooling to economic preparation is troubling. The role and function of schooling in a democratic society is more robust than economic instrumentalism, and many teachers understand schooling to involve societal, interpersonal, moral, affective, and other dimensions. In addition, due to the longstanding history of xenophobic and exploitative U.S. policies and practices regarding immigration and citizenship, the question of employment has many more dimensions than merely skill acquisition. Leaving aside these arguments, it is problematic to seek only to improve teaching practices that produce so-called success in schooling without stepping back to reevaluate more generally the definitions of success and failure that schools (re)produce and the implications of these definitions (McDermott and Varenne; Varenne and McDermott; Nygreen). To extend Denstaedt, Roop, and Best's metaphor, there can be issues with the pipeline beyond the leaks along the way. Obviously no single book can resolve this long-standing social problem nor should it be expected to. However, not to acknowledge this tension is deeply troubling to me in part because the omission further obfuscates the problem of not offering the tacit consent that (re)constructs hegemony.

In addition, the authors suggest that the presence or absence of student achievement and engagement solely rests in teaching practices. If teachers therefore adopt the teaching practices illustrated in the books, the implication is that achievement and engagement will correspondingly increase. For instance, after many of Lattimer's classroom narratives, she includes testimonials from students or teachers highlighting achievement and/or engagement (e.g., 47-48). Unquestionably, teacher practices matter, and practitioners should strive to increase the cultural, economic, and experiential relevancy of their pedagogy and

curriculum. However, teaching practices are neither the only educational practices nor only social practices that influence school achievement and engagement. Thus, for the authors, there is not the possibility that some students, such as queer youth, find schoolish literacies inherently alienating as de Castell and Jenson argue or that even when they are aware of the codes of power, some youth, such as homeless young women of color, will actively choose to reject and eschew performing these codes, such as through adopting a politics of respectability, as Cox suggests. Again, it is not that these authors must resolve these difficulties but that they might acknowledge them and the complexities they entail, particularly regarding the intimate interrelations of teaching and social practices. Such an acknowledgement would conceptually enrich the books and extend their meaningfulness and utility for classrooms teachers.

In short, Denstaedt, Roop, and Best, Filkins, and Lattimer all describe compelling ways to work on classroom curricula and pedagogies as sites for social justice through maximizing best practices, thus working effectively within dominant schooling structures. However, they elide discussions of also working against such structures, an omission that becomes troublesome in at least two ways. First, while working within school constraints to work on classroom practices is useful, it can be undermined and even undone if the larger constraints are not acknowledged much less engaged, even if in small ways. Second, these teleological tensions compound the epistemological ones discussed above. When constraints and shortcomings beyond the classroom are not named and are thus rendered invisible, there is little need or relevancy for teacher expertise or knowledge to travel along circuits beyond the classroom or school. Classroom change exists merely for economic functionalism rather than having the possibility of journeying along more broad and humanizing pathways, such as cultivating justice in political economy and the nation-state.

Experiential Tensions

Finally, with respect to working within, on and against dominant schooling practices, tensions inform the authors' consideration of teachers' experiences of (un)certainty and (dis)comfort in adopting an inquiry stance. As I mentioned above, each of the authors seems well aware of the possibilities for practitioner-readers to be resistant to, and even dismissive of, their suggestions. In fact, Lattimer includes a postscript (133-140) narrating an experience where she had coffee with a teacher friend who did exactly this, which in turn prompted her to add a number of pragmatic implementation tips. Collectively, all of the authors demonstrate this type of sensitivity to their intended audiences, seeking to be practical, compassionate, encouraging, and accessible. This responsiveness is a strength of this collection of books and, in my eyes, reflects the authors' commitments to impacting teachers and, by extension, the communities and youth these teachers serve. It also reflects their admirable resolve to mediate the complex nexus of educational stakeholders.

However, I worry that there are affective experiences of uncertainty and discomfort that such assurances sidestep, and consequently the authors leave teachers participating in inquiry with fewer resources for acknowledging, engaging, and moving beyond this uncertainty and discomfort. Fecho argues that experiences of threat are inherent to inquiry. Ignoring, downplaying, or denying their existence is unproductive. He instead argues for teachers to embrace these instances of threat and inquire into them further, which in turn enables transcendence. I agree with Fecho and extend his argument. Teacher inquiry not only involves experiences of discomfort, or even threat, due to others' disagreement with one's ideas, but also similar feelings connected to the uncertainty inherent in asking questions for which one currently has no answers, if such answers can even exist. Teachers adopting an inquiry stance can often find themselves in places of not knowing, particularly as they experience uncertainty with respect to next steps or the "right" steps in the process. In this way, inquiry includes learning not only

new knowledges but also new processes, dispositions, and affective comportments.

In this perspective, inquiry must value and engage with uncertainty and discomfort in principled and contextualized ways. Inquiring teachers can productively conceptualize these experiences, such as mistake making, as learning opportunities rather than dangers to avoid. While attempting to mitigate these affective dimensions can offer the affordance of initially inviting teachers into inquiry work regarding disciplinary literacies and reading assessment, it can also leave them ill equipped or frustrated when they do (inevitably) experience discomfort and uncertainty, or, as Fecho names it, "threat" (10). These experiential tensions further compound the teleological tensions of socially justice schooling or the epistemological tensions of expertise by reinforcing a circumscribed telos and epistemic circuit because they potentially reduce teachers' capacities to enact the powerful tools outlined by these authors.

Conclusion

It is no easy task to attempt to mediate among the diverse perspectives of stakeholders in schooling, especially in ways that support teachers in adopting an inquiry stance towards social justice. Denstaedt, Roop, and Best, Filkins, and Lattimer make valuable contributions to the field of literacy education in this way, particularly around practitioner uptake of research regarding disciplinary literacies and reading assessment. In offering encouraging visions of the possible, though, the authors at times elide some of the epistemological, teleological, and experiential tensions inherent in their endeavors. Certainly, readers do not expect these authors to resolve such tensions, especially because their books' explicit purposes focus on classroom teaching practices rather than other topics. However, there is a significant difference between lacking resolution and omitting acknowledgement. In my eyes, naming tensions—in particular tensions that can undermine the vary enterprise undertaken—is an important and responsible step to take. In my experiences

during the past nine years as a member of a teacher inquiry group focused on interrupting homophobia, heterosexism, and transphobia (see Blackburn et al. for a history of the early years of this group), I have found that wrestling with the tensions can be incredibly generative and transformative. Thus, I longed for greater reflexivity and explicitness around these topics in each of the books.

In seeking to enrich readers' engagement with these three books, I suggest pairing them with one explicitly on teacher inquiry, such as Cochran-Smith and Lytle or Goswami et al., which is part of the National Conference on Research in Language and Literacy's "Language and Literacy" series. Nonetheless, high school teachers looking for concrete classroom illustrations of disciplinary literacies and inquiry-based reading assessment approaches will find these three books to be edifying and useful. They offer a wide range of practical classroom tools that have multiple entry points depending on one's context and comfort level. In addition, they are rich resources for teacher inquiry groups to draw upon in their discussions and their classroom projects.

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