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Of Stand-Up Comics, Statisticians, Storytellers, and Small Girls Walking Backward: A New Look at the Discourses of Literacy Research*

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The title of this address comes, in part, from an experience I had last spring, during the height of the final Seinfeld show mania, when I was talking to a good friend of mine—Nancy Case—who teaches social studies at a local high school. Nancy was telling me about her students, their rapt interest in the swirl of publicity about Jerry Seinfeld, and she said, "My students are now memorizing Seinfeld. Every day they recite whole monologues absolutely word-for-word from the show and the stand-up routines." When she told me that, I was instantly reminded of my experience about ten years ago during an event called "Cousins Week" in which my son and stepchildren and the children of my sister and brother gathered in Oakland, California, for a week of fun and play. There were seven cousins in all—five between the ages of 19 and 23.

Stand-Up Comics

On the first night as I cooked dinner, the 19– to 23-year-old group pretty much dominated the conversation as they milled about in the kitchen and dining room talking, sharing stories, and generally enjoying one another. Then, apropos of nothing, one of the male cousins started reciting from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail,* mimicking perfectly the voices and delivery of Eric Idle, Michael Palin, John Cleese, and the rest of the Python group. After my nephew had recited a while, each of the four other males in the group began to chime in, continuing the verbatim recitation, or launching their own chosen scene, in an alternating chain. Throughout this performance, we all roared with laughter, not only at the Python silliness but also in tribute to the skill of the performance itself; each cousin took up the recitation without missing a beat, held character and accent, and recited flawlessly. And this went on all week—we heard much of *Holy Grail,* routine after routine from the *Flying Circus* television show, and bits of *Life of Brian.* We culminated the week with a Friday night/Saturday night Monty Python film festival with lots of choral participation as the dialogue unfolded. What amazed me about all this was the scope of the accomplishment—these young people held an

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extraordinary amount of text in ready memory—and that they had bothered to do it at all.

But as I reflected on these two events—Cousins' Week and Nancy's students reciting Seinfeld's comedy—I was reminded of the number of times I have sat with friends and shared retellings of favorite *I Love Lucy* shows. In each instance, the hilarity grew as we remembered detail after detail of Lucy and Ethel's exploits. At that party, the episode that triggered the discussion was the one in which Lucy and Ethel baked bread using so much flour and yeast that this giant bread loaf, when baked, rammed open the oven door, pushed across the room, and pinned Lucy against the wall. This story was followed in rapid succession and amid great laughter by the wine-making/grape-stomping episode, the time Lucy and Ethel got locked in the basement freezer, the making of the Vitaveetavegimen commercial, and of course, the candy factory production line speed-up episode.

What is interesting is that reminiscing about favorite *Lucy* shows almost always leads to other stories: *M*A*S*H* show episodes, Archie and Edith Bunker exchanges on *All in the Family,* Richard Pryor routines, George Carlin's monologues, and the many great characters from *Saturday Night Live:* Roseanne Roseannadanna, Emily Latella, the Wild and Crazy Guys, the Coneheads, and the Church Lady, to name a few. What I have to conclude here is that we continue to revisit these characters and routines and shows, whether by recitation or retelling, because each captures some thing, or a complex of things, that illuminate the universals of human behavior. Underneath our laughter at silliness and satire or comically naive or boorish behavior, is a recognition that we are seeing a reflection of ourselves and our lived worlds.

It then strikes me that the work of the stand-up comic or sit-com character is not unlike the work of the researcher. The role of the researcher—and, by the way, of the storytellers of all cultures—is to *explain* lived worlds: to illuminate, analyze, interpret, and clarify reality. That is what we are about in NRC, where our little slice of reality has to do with literacy processes, literacy learning, literacy theory, and literacy instruction. We now have a century-long history of literacy research that has, inevitably, grown to reflect changing theory, technology, social and pedagogical views, and the academic background and bent of researchers themselves. As David Pearson and Diane Stephens (1994) comment in their review of reading research:

> . . . what we know about reading, how we think about reading, even what we call "reading" has changed considerably over the last thirty years. Reading, once the sole domain of educators, has become transdisciplinary. The knowledge base that has grown out of the once separate fields of psychology, sociology, linguistics, and literary theory has been created by and/or shared with educators. Indeed, many individuals now identify themselves as educators and as cognitive psychologists, psycholinguists, sociolinguists, literary theorists, and even sociopsycholinguists. (p. 35)

A natural result of the confluence of these many disciplines in the study of reading and literacy is that our research traditions—and thus the stories we tell—have changed accordingly. Where we once dashed into schools and classrooms,

taught or tested, and dashed out again data in hand ready for correlation coefficients, stepwise regressions, and canonical rotations, we now spend weeks and months, and even years in classrooms observing, asking, interviewing, and reflecting on shared experience. Where we once recorded perfect saccadic eye movements and return sweeps as college sophomores sat in laboratories and "read" under the scrutiny of eye movement machines, we now watch as new and experienced readers scan and rescan text and environment to guide their reading and meaning-making. Where we once asked, "What is *the* best method for beginning reading instruction?" we now ask, "What is it that children do and think as they become literate beings?" These, and many, many other differences are characteristic of our changing field. For further explication, I refer you to Pat Alexander's 1997 NRC Research Address (1998) and her analysis of the transgenerational shifts in literacy research perspectives and traditions since the 1970s.

Statisticians and Storytellers

What concerns me today is the apparent *fear* in some quarters of the widening sphere of knowledge coming to bear on literacy research. Now that we no longer *all* are educators with a background in educational psychology, and include linguists, cognitive psychologists, anthropologists, and feminist theorists, our views, theories, and research stances have broadened correspondingly to reflect these new perspectives. And yet, here we are on the edge of the millennium, in the midst of unprecedented ideological and theoretical diversity in our field, creating great national panels of scholars whose job it is to judge certain research to be good or bad, worthy or unworthy; certain theoretical stances and research methodologies to be acceptable or unacceptable; and certain research studies to be solely representative of what we know about literacy learning and instruction.

What concerns me even more is the decision by federal and state legislatures, funding agencies, and Departments of Education to narrow their view of what counts as exemplary (or even acceptable) literacy research and to use this narrow view as the yardstick for determining the worth of funding proposals or instructional programs. Recently, the Department of Education in California asserted that only "confirmed research" served as the basis of the new state framework for literacy instruction. Confirmed research has been defined in California Law AB 1086 as research that has been replicated and duplicated; further, to qualify as acceptable, research must be "current," defined as research that has been conducted and reported according to "contemporary standards of scientific investigation," whatever that means. It seems clear that the definitions in AB 1086 of current, confirmed research eliminates whole bodies of research knowledge—including the work of those who have gone before us—that could inform the state instructional framework. The end result as reflected in the references cited for the framework is a research base that is "remarkably narrow" (Ruddell, 1998, p. 4), omitting large parts of our accumulated knowledge, and virtually all of the work of federally funded research centers of the last two decades.

These narrow definitions of research correctness are reflected in recent federal legislation as well: HR 2614, the Reading Excellence Act, states that "scientifically based research"

> means the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain valid knowledge relevant to reading development, reading instruction, and reading difficulties; and shall include research that 1) employs systematic, empirical methods that draw on observations or experiment; 2) involves rigorous data analyses that are adequate to test the stated hypotheses and justify the general conclusions drawn; 3) relies on measurements or observational methods that provide valid data across evaluators and observers and across multiple measures and observations; and 4) has been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts through a comparably rigorous, objective, and scientific review. (Sec. 2252)

On the face of it, these definitions seem unobjectionable; and yet we must ask: "By whose standards shall 'rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures' and 'systematic, empirical methods' and 'valid data' be determined?" Who determines the 'contemporary standards of scientific investigation'?" "How do we know those standards are right?" And, "How accommodating are these definitions to research traditions beyond the scope of past and current educational research?"

Jerry Harste, in his International Reading Association Hall of Fame address (1998), outlines the many contributions made to our knowledge base by psycholinguists, sociolinguists, sociosemioticians, cultural anthropologists, critical theorists, and others. He makes the point that the knowledge gained from these many perspectives has allowed us to "develop a practical theory of literacy and literacy instruction that far exceeded what our predecessors had ever dared imagine." And yet, he states further, "national panels (and the popular press, I might add) have tagged these intellectual achievements 'reading wars' and we are to put them behind us and come to a new consensus on which we all agree." In other words, we are all to conform—to accept the Party Line, to conduct only certain kinds of research, and to disavow knowledge arising from research traditions outside that accepted canon. Mary Daly (1973), a feminist theologian, calls such limitation on what is deemed acceptable form in acquiring knowledge, "methodolatry." She writes:

> The tyranny of methodolatry hinders new discoveries. It prevents us from raising questions never asked before and from being illumined by ideas that do not fit into preestablished boxes and forms. The worshippers of Method have an effective way of handling data that does not fit into the Respectable Categories of Questions and Answers. They simply classify it as nondata, thereby rendering it invisible. (p. 11)

Mary Belenky and her colleague-authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* (1986/1996), state further that, "When a government funding agency insists upon a particular methodology in the research it supports, it outlaws questions that cannot be answered in that fashion." (p. 96) I quite agree. And so, it seems useful to make the case for widening, rather than narrowing, the lens through which we explore literacy processes. Certainly, as Alan Peshkin (1993) asserts: "No research

paradigm has a monopoly on quality. None can deliver promising outcomes with certainty. None have the grounds for saying 'this is it' about their designs, procedures, and anticipated outcomes" (p. 28).

And certainly, also, we, and the research paradigms within which we function, are not without critics. Jim Hoffman, in his 1989 NRC Presidential Address (1990), notes that in our effort to create a science of teaching, largely through the process-product research paradigm, we have ignored the power of myth in teaching—myths such as one that holds that good teachers have high expectations for students and immerses them daily in ambiguity, and then helps them find their way out—and instead have lent our efforts to establishing research-based criteria for "effective teaching" that focus all too often on direct teaching of literal content knowledge and frequent assessment of that literal knowledge. He states, "There is far more harm being done in classrooms today in the name of research than there is good" (p. 2). His sentiments are echoed and enlarged by Michael Scriven's (1997) analysis of the failure of educational research to do what it should do. Scriven says:

> In the Australian idiom, we have been beavering away. We have built many lodges, and the quality of the construction is often good. We are competent beavers. But busy work is not self-justifying, and we lack the justification that beavers have: This is not our house we are building. Rather, it is the schoolhouse for the nation's children, and the workshop for the nation's learning adults. . . .
>
> Furthermore, most of what we are doing is busy work that frets nervously around the border zone of statistical significance. That kind of work, even if well directed, is not even methodologically self-justifying. As Fred Mosteller put it . . . you can fiddle around with the sigmas while you are looking for something worthwhile, but they represent no achievement in themselves. For that we need interocular significance, a result that hits you between the eyes. (p. 20)

It is, I believe, no stretch to say that we are today at a critical juncture in literacy research. On the one hand, there are those, both outside and within our community, who would impose narrow standards of acceptability on the work we do, even now at this time when our scholarly backgrounds are at their most diverse. The push for conformity is strong, indeed, when politicians write into law the criteria by which our work will be judged. On the other hand, there are those, again both within and outside our community, who remind us of the wages of our fallibility: the children and youth of our countries. And, since there is no single Truth for us to hold onto, it seems useful to examine issues contributing to the bifurcation among us and ways that we can learn to live comfortably with our differences. This is not a plea for our differences to go away, rather, it is an attempt to illuminate in a public forum the roots of our differences, propose ways to define and address our individual positions, and keep the conversation going.

Research and Researchers in the Educational Enterprise

Let us begin with what I consider to be a fundamental issue: the role of research and researchers in the educational enterprise. These roles are neither clearly defined, nor collectively agreed upon. In fact, John K. Smith (1997) identi-

fies the defining and central force that divides us as a research community as the "vocabularies that are being employed to describe educational research and to articulate the stories we are telling to ourselves, and to others, about research and ourselves as researchers" (p. 7). He uses the series of articles in *Educational Researcher* in which Mike McKenna, Richard Robinson, and Jack Miller (1990a, 1990b) exchange arguments with Carol Edelsky (1990) to clarify "the current rift in perspective between whole language arts and traditional language arts by examining the basis of each view in research and theory" (McKenna, Robinson, & Miller, 1990a, p. 3). Throughout this exchange, the debaters remain adamantly opposed—from their fundamental positions as to what constitutes proper research methods, to the language they use to describe their work, to the assumptions they make about reading process and reading instruction. Smith (1997) describes the exchange as "vibrant, if not at times, acrimonious" (p. 6) and identifies four possible ways to interpret the disagreement and arrive at resolution:

First, *it could be viewed as nothing more than a few people getting a little bit testy with one another,* with the obvious solution that everyone be more reasonable. Smith dismisses this with the argument that "these are intelligent, serious people who have thought too deeply about the issues to allow mere testiness to dominate their comments" (p. 6).

Second, *the debate could be seen as an empirical one that should be resolved empirically;* in other words, we could conduct research to find out which approach works better and name that side the winner. This solution is confounded and made unworkable by the fact that the participants do not agree on such basic issues as the meaning of the term "works better" and the nature of research itself.

Third, *this may be a philosophical dispute that can only be decided by mounting carefully crafted philosophical argument in a point-counterpoint dialectic until one side "wins."* Smith rejects this possibility. He states:

> . . . there is no philosophical solution to their disagreement. . . . I find it difficult to imagine what kind of argument it would take from either side to decisively convince the other side. Each side's demonstrations of the inconsistencies in argument of the other side rarely penetrate very deeply because, if nothing else, we very often find that one person's inconsistency is another person's consistency. It is unlikely that we will ever see the decisive argument that will allow one side to banish the other from the pitch with head bowed low. (pp. 6–7)

So finally, Smith settles upon the possibility that *the essential disagreement between Edelsky and McKenna and colleagues is the result of the "shifting vocabularies" of educational research* from the traditional story (Smith's language) of *objectivity, subjectivity, validity*, and *generalizability* to the evolving vocabulary of *voice, narrative, life history, participatory consciousness,* and the like (p. 7).

In recent commentary on Smith's analysis, Hammersley (1998) challenges many of Smith's conclusions, but does agree with Smith that disputes like the Edelsky/McKenna et al. exchange are more than disagreements about empirical matters. He states:

> They represent differences over fundamental features of the social world and how it can be understood and about the very purpose of educational research. Furthermore, the areas of dispute are not stand-alone issues. Each side's views about particular empirical matters are related to philosophical and political assumptions that are treated as mutually implicative. The result is that the disagreements are much more intractable than is implied by what is often referred to as the foundationalist model, in terms of which they could be resolved by appeal to indubitable data or compelling logic. (p. 18)

Although Hammersley and Smith disagree on the issue of "shifting vocabularies" in research, I see a link between the research language we use and the "fundamental features of the world" and "philosophical and political assumptions" that Hammersley identifies as critical components of our differences. Thus, I would like to explore this notion a bit, first from a Whorfian perspective, and then from others.

The Whorfian Theory Complex

All of us, at one time or another, have run across the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, known alternately as the *linguistic relativity principle,* which suggests that language structures our understanding of the world. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis has been criticized for omissions and what some consider its overgeneralizations in its interpretation of the thought–language connection. However, Penny Lee (1997) suggests that her access to and analysis of the full range of Whorf's writing over the past 10 years has expanded traditional interpretations of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis creating what she calls the "Whorfian Theory Complex" (p. 431), in which 12 interweaving elements explicate and broaden the original hypothesis. Four of these 12 elements, I believe, are useful in exploring our differences as literacy researchers.

The first element is *patternment,* or Whorf's notion that who we are and what we do are significantly structured by patterns of thought and behavior absorbed during enculturation. In research communities we often identify ourselves in terms of our culture. We call ourselves psycholinguists, or semioticians, or reading educators. That's patternment. Or, we choose up sides and participate in (or endure) great and long-standing departmental feuds between the Reading faculty and Language Arts faculty. Or, we specialize in specific aspects of literacy research—early literacy, vocabulary development, metacognition—and join or create special interest groups focused on our own predilections of what constitutes good research or instruction. These are also patternment. All of these are patterns of thinking, values, and beliefs acquired during our enculturation as doctoral students and emerging scholars. These groupings are neither haphazard nor happenstance, and within each are certain ways of knowing and thinking that influence what we as individuals know and think. An easy test of this hypothesis is to attend a professional conference outside one's own cultural circle and note the alternative modes of thinking, language, and rituals.

A second construct, is *points in the pattern.* This refers to the connectedness of seemingly separate and disparate bits of any given phenomenon, whether

it be language, dance, or how one views a sunset. Lee uses Sapir's example that "we know something is a dance step [as opposed to a random twitch of the foot] only if we know the sequence of movements that makes up the pattern as a whole, and within which this particular movement can be identified as an integral part of the pattern on the basis of its relationships to other movements" (Lee, p. 436). Whorf suggests that we extract an entity from the matrix of experience in which it occurs and perceive it a specific way because we understand the context of the situation to be a certain perspective and not something else; thus, the perception of "dance step" instead of "foot twitch." And thus also, the differences among us as we observe and interpret behaviors of learners engaged in literacy acts. What to one of us is a miscue, to another is error; what some see as temporary or invented spelling, others see as misspelling; what some of us call dyslexia, others view as acquired behaviors resulting from social, emotional, and situational influences operating during early literacy learning. Our decision to give a thing a certain name depends on the perceived meanings implied by the phenomenon itself.

The third element, *isolates of experience and meaning,* suggests that the act of making meaning from experience is one in which we isolate or abstract *essentials* out of situations in some specified way. Whorf (1956a) believed that this act, and thus how our attention is organized, is linked to linguistic enculturation because different languages encourage their speakers to draw "different essentials out of the same situation" (p. 162). And so, some of us look for the poem that emerges from transactions between reader and text, others perceive reading fluency to be the result of increasingly automatic processing of text, and still others identify schemata underlying proficient comprehension of text. All watching the same reader reading.

And finally, the fourth element is *abstractive processes,* our ability to isolate aspects of experience and elaborate them in language. Lee (1997) comments, "What learners learn to notice and abstract from the matrix of their occurrence are isolates of experience. . . . The process of abstracting isolates out of sensory data is therefore primary when it comes to the task of learning to make sense of stimuli in any sensory domain" (p. 443). Abstractive processes explain why literacy researchers' vocabularies diverge, not only with respect to the *way* we do research, but even our underlying assumptions and definitions of the language of the field. I have noted the miscue/error, invented spelling/misspelling, and dyslexia/acquired behavior dichotomies that are salient differences in patterns we see.

Pat Alexander, Diane Schallert, and Vickie Hare (1991) found significant disparity in the meanings literacy researchers attach to constructs such as *prior knowledge, metacognition, domain knowledge,* and the like. This is similar to the findings of Lesly Rex, Judith Green, Carol Dixon, and the Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group (1998) in their richly textured examination of meanings for the construct of *context* in articles published in literacy research journals. They found little consistency in the meanings associated with the word "context" in 93 articles published during a 5-year period in the journals of *Reading Research Quarterly, Research in the Teaching of English,* and *Journal of Literacy Research.* Among their conclusions is that, not only do we as members of the same research

community have difficulty understanding the particular meaning held by other members, neither will outsiders to our community "have the tools to access the ways the use of the terms may differ from those to which they are accustomed" (p. 418). Thus, the disjuncture: We literally use the same language to talk about different things or, conversely, different language to talk about the same things.

All four elements—patternment, points in the pattern, isolates of experience, and abstractive processes—interweave with the linguistic relativity principle within the Whorfian Theory Complex to support Whorf's (1956b) notion that no one is able to describe or explain phenomena impartially or free of the influence that their language exerts: ". . . all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated" (p. 214).

I assert that these Whorfian notions are, indeed, pertinent (although not totally explanatory) as we consider our differences as literacy researchers today, because the diverse scholarly traditions we bring to the research constitute a language and conceptual frame that influences and shapes our thinking. And most of us spend most of our time living and thinking within the language and frame of whatever scholarly tradition we represent. Thus, the patterns we acknowledge, the points in the pattern, and the abstractions we make are defined by that tradition, as the abstractions of our differently schooled colleagues are equally so.

The Quantum Leap

Constance Weaver (1994) suggests still another perspective for analyzing differences in research traditions, approaches, and outcomes. She posits that we, as observers, actually affect the phenomena we observe. In her analysis of the parallels between quantum physics and literacy theory, Weaver describes how light has the potential to be both wave and particle; Thomas Young, in his experiments of the early 1800s determined the wave-like property of light. Later, in the 20th century, Albert Einstein demonstrated the particle property of light. Weaver (1994) elaborates:

> If we choose to observe light by means of the double-slit experiment that Young used, we find that light is a wave. If we choose to observe light by using the photoelectric effect that Einstein used, we find that light is a particle . . . at any given time we "make" light be either a wave or a particle, depending on how we choose to observe it. By selecting one property of light to observe, we simultaneously obscure the other property. (p. 1187)

This is the quantum leap, the simultaneous actualization of one possibility and the negation of all others. Weaver (1994) states further that "when a human observer intervenes to measure some aspect or quality of a particle, such as its position or momentum, the person *actualizes* one possibility (makes it happen) and collapses all other possibilities (negates the possibility of their happening)" and comments on the difficulty of analyzing the physical world into separately identifiable parts. She states, "No sooner do we identify a particle than it typically collides with other particles in its environment, transacting in a burst of energy

that annihilates the original particles and creates new ones" (p. 1188). Thus she acknowledges and emphasizes the *transactions* inherent in events and in research—what she, and others call "the continuous dance of energy" (p. 1189)—in which change and motion are constant. "Transient forms sparkle in and out of existence creating a never-ending, forever-newly-created reality" (Zukav, 1979, p. 197). And how that reality is perceived depends, in part, on the observer himself or herself. Weaver (1994) states, "Physicists have discovered that at least in the subatomic realm, a human observer cannot observe or measure anything without affecting its very nature" and, with respect to the continuous dance of energy, concurs with Zukav that, "At the subatomic level, the dancer and the dance are one" (p. 1189).

Weaver then draws parallels between physics research and reading research (as well as literacy theory) and asserts that reading researchers must certainly have the same effect on the outcome of their research as do physicists. Through the actualization of one possibility, or set of possibilities, we shut down all others and make the quantum leap. We see that which we are looking to see, whether that is the poem, automatic processing or schema activation; thus, what we measure and how we measure are guided and affected by our theoretical perceptions. Evidently the standard of objectivity and separateness is as chimerical for us as it is for physicists. She asserts further that we cannot ignore the transactional nature of our research; the transactions created by researchers' manipulations of the learning environment or event, or even their presence in the environment or at the event. The subsequent reports we give are steeped in the traditions and foundational assumptions and theories of our chosen research culture and are shaped by the quantum leaps we have made and the transactions that have ensued.

Maybe that is why it is so hard for us to listen to one another across cultures. Maybe that is why John K. Smith says that the great divide between researchers is centered in the "stories we are telling to ourselves, and to others, about research and ourselves as researchers." And maybe that is why we seem caught at this moment between the compatibilists who want to know why we cannot all just get along, and the incompatibilists who aver that we cannot even communicate, let alone get along. In the end, I must conclude that we are not very good at talking to one another across the divide of our research traditions because the knowledge domains within which we operate are, themselves, so richly textured and layered, and are so frequently explicit only in our own minds. Perhaps the irony here is that the very richness of our diversity—that which is our strength—contributes mightily to our divide.

Addressing Our Differences

I said earlier that my goal is *not* a call for action to make our differences disappear, but to make our differences even more clearly visible, explicated, and understood. I think for us to continue to flourish as a literacy research community we must first, in our writing and in our conversations with one another, reveal the

assumptions, principles, and theories that constitute our world view, and thus, that guide and influence our work. Donna Alvermann, in her 1992 NRC presidential address (1993) questioned "why we typically choose to mute our own voices by not disclosing in the *body* of our scholarly writings the kind of information that would enable readers to discover our social histories, biases, beliefs—in short who *we* as academics really are" (p. 3). Failure to do so, she believes, creates the "silent second texts," hidden from readers' view, that make invisible the patterns and abstractions we have chosen *and created* in the work we call objective research. She argues, "Individuals who read our research deserve to know about the choices we made among interpretations as well as the values and preferences that drove us to those choices" (p. 7). Alvermann's stance is echoed by Lesly Rex and colleagues (1998) who state that our many different assumptions, viewpoints, and perspectives are "not visible across groups at the national level, leaving the differences unexamined and the consequences of this inattention invisible" (p. 406).

Second, we must continue to talk to one another, even when we disagree—*especially* when we disagree—so that we can continue to negotiate meaning. This is what Whorf (1956b) calls "calibration of linguistic background" (p. 214). Martyn Hammersley (1998) argues that views from opposing sides are not incommensurable, that is, he rejects the notion that we have "no common ground and no possibility of reaching agreement on some matters" (p. 18). To admit incommensurability, in his mind, is to eliminate any "practical possibility of mutual understanding and learning." Lesly Rex and her associates (1998) agree. They state:

> It is not merely a matter of dialogue. We need to understand each other's positions and what each contributes to a dialogue. It is a matter of understanding where our findings are complimentary [*sic*], the same, or contradictory, and when they are contradictory, comprehending the reasons. [We do this] . . . by clearly defining terms and revisiting them from time to time to keep them explicit. (p. 406)

A clear example of this kind of conversation are collaborative research efforts deliberately designed to include disparate views and voices such as the work of the Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group itself, the long-standing research and teaching collaboration of the Kamehameha Early Education Program, and Gloria Ladson-Billings's (1997) research collaborative of African-American and white teachers engaged in what she calls the group conversation method of research.

Third, let us stop being surprised by growth, change, and increasing diversity of our community and expect it. The program from the 1976 NRC conference is printed on the equivalent of six 8" × 11" pages. Last year's NRC program is seventy-six 8" × 11" pages of densely packed text. This is the interocular evidence, the kind that hits you right between the eyes. One cannot fail to perceive the difference in these programs even before turning the cover page. And when one does turn the page, differences amaze: In 1976, Thursday, December 2nd began with Ed Fry's Presidential Address followed by 16 Paper sessions, the

Business Meeting, and Vital Issues from 8:00 p.m. to midnight. In contrast, Thursday, December 4th, 1997, began with 6 Symposia, 2 Round Table sessions, 2 Alternative Format sessions, and 3 Paper sessions; followed by Kathy Au's Presidential Address; followed by 1 Research Workshop, 8 Symposia, 6 Round Table sessions, 18 Paper sessions, 9 Alternative Format sessions, a Special Session after hours sponsored by the Technology Committee, the Birds of a Feather sessions, the *JLR/Yearbook* Reception, the Town Meeting, and Vital Issues from 9:00 p.m. to midnight. The volume differences, alone, are astonishing in these two programs. Research topics and methodologies in 1976 and 1997 are just as divergent. Here are some selected titles from each program:

1976 Program

"Levels of Cloze-Test Replacement as Related to Agreement and/or Disagreement with Controversial-Content Reading Materials"

"The Effect of Two Behavioral Treatments Upon Reading Achievement and Test Anxiety"

"Children's Oral Responses to Silent Reading Test Items"

"Scripts, Texts, and Questions: A Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension Derived from Artificial Intelligence"

1997 Program

"Seeing Literacy through the Eyes of Pearl Bright: A Welfare Mom"

"Guiding Discussions of Information Books: An Investigation of Teachers' Beliefs and Practices"

"When Two Signs Go Walking They Both Do the Talking"

"Reading Comprehension Processes and Strategies in L1 and L2: 16 Case Studies from Malaysian Secondary Schools"

Now consider the wonder of it all. There are people sitting in this room today whose names and papers appeared in the NRC program in 1976, and there are other people sitting in this room today who were 12 or 13 years old and had not even figured out junior high school in 1976! That is wondrous indeed. More importantly, we would expect that the number, range, breadth, and depth of topics, research trends, and research approaches would be vastly expanded in 1997 from the 1976 program. Otherwise, why make this trip every year? It is to our *advantage,* not our disadvantage, that we have grown so; from that change and growth have come the insights and theoretical advances that David Pearson and Diane Stephens, Pat Alexander, Jerry Harste, and others acknowledge. If we can keep our history in mind, if we can remember all the things we did not know in 1976 that we know now and the contribution of the knowledge generated in 1976 *and* the knowledge that increasingly diverse theoretical and research traditions bring to where we are now, we can understand what Constance Weaver refers to as the dual contributions of opposing views. And we can hold both in high esteem. We cannot even conceive of what we may know in 2018 that we do not know now.

And finally, we must resist with all our might legislative and policy-makers' attempts to pit us against one another by labeling some of us wrong and some of us right, and their urgency to develop instructional mandates based on what

someone or some group has defined as "correct" research. In the National Research Synthesis session at IRA last May, David Pearson (1998) said in the panel discussion, "I never met a mandate that I didn't not like. They fly in the face of everything we've learned about teacher development. If people mandate that which is your favorite thing in all the world, you should resist it with everything you have, because the next mandate to come along could be the opposite." We cannot have a healthy literacy research community that is confined by prescribed or proscribed research topics or practices. We must have the freedom and absolute will to ask the questions that have not been asked, explore in ways that have not been tried, and discover the answers that have never been thought of before. This seems only right and true, in the real world as well as in our research community. If it were otherwise, all stand-up comics would repeat a single routine, all statisticians would choose the same test, and all storytellers would tell the same tale.

Small Girls Walking Backward

And so I close by sharing a favorite reading about a research paradigm most of us have not thought much about recently, perhaps. In early November three years ago, the day after I received word that I had been elected to the office of NRC Vice President, I told my graduate reading class the great news, and how honored I was and how I must begin planning immediately for this Presidential Address. I recited to them the names of some of the people who would be in this room during that address—names whose work they had been reading and studying throughout their graduate programs—and watched as their eyes widened. Then I told them about my experiences as one of Tony Manzo's graduate students at my first NRC, avidly attending sessions, driving Harry Singer and Al Kingston around Kansas City at 10:30 at night looking for a kosher deli, watching the much-heralded Ron Carver/Ernst Rothkopf debate, and witnessing the great fight-song sing-off at Vital Issues led by David Pearson and Dale Johnson, with Dale's inimitable version of Wisconsin's "If you want to be a Badger, then come along with me"—and watched as their eyes got even wider. Then from the back of the room came Joy Conley's voice saying, "Marty, you must read to them in your Presidential speech. You read to us every class, and you must read in your Presidential address. That is who you are. Promise us you will." And so, I promised. Here, then, I make good on my promise with a piece by one of my favorite *San Francisco Chronicle* columnists, Jon Carroll. This piece appears in his collection, *Near-Life Experiences: The Best of Jon Carroll* (1993). As I said a moment earlier, it is about research.

A Small Girl Walking Backward[1]

It was a nice day and I was strolling, just strolling, down a sidewalk in charming, yet frequently maligned Oakland, a city in California. And I saw a girl walking backward.

1. A Small Girl Walking Backward (Jon Carroll, 1993) is reprinted with permission.

She was, at a guess, 10 years old. Her concentration was total. The tip of her tongue was peeking out of the corner of her mouth. She was looking down; novice backward walking does require attention to the feet.

She was walking backward up the sidewalk. She was walking backward with complete intention and attention.

She was, in a sense, conducting an experiment. Because I did not speak to her, I don't know the exact parameters of the experiment, but it was something like: How far can I walk backward without running into something or tripping or otherwise embarrassing myself?

This is what kids do; they perform experiments.

They are trying to figure out how the world works, and adults haven't been all that much help. If you ask your mom how far a human being can walk backward without falling into the ocean or winding up in China, she will say, "You shouldn't walk backward. You might hurt yourself."

Scientifically speaking, this is not a useful sentiment. Kids do not want considered opinions; they want fact. This girl was doing what scientists do: She had formed a hypothesis and was engaged in testing it. Kids are natural experimenters; they enjoy unexplained results.

My own kidhood was filled with experiments. I wanted to know whether a bike could jump a curb without substantial damage to the rider. The answer, as it happened, was no, but the validity of the experiment was confirmed by independent experts.

Later, I wanted to discover whether it was possible to leap into a compost pile from the top of a garden shed. My current survival indicated that this act did not violate the known laws of physics. This was an extremely comforting outcome to me personally; my Alive Quotient (AQ) remained steady no matter how often I hurled myself, in a state of bliss and rage, off the roof of the shed.

During that same period, I sought to discover whether (a) it was possible to find every Elmer Valo baseball card ever issued, (b) it was possible for the average American youth to burn harmless spiders without also adversely impacting the floor and (c) it was possible for the average American youth to say the words "Prince Albert in a can" into a telephone without being arrested.

The answers were (a) no, (b) no and (c) yes.

So when I saw the girl walking backward, I thought about the scientific nature of childhood. No one had told her to walk backward; no one had suggested that this would be a nice thing to do for school or an appropriate topic of conversation for the family dining table.

She was doing what she was doing because she required knowledge. She did not have a grant or a salary or the promise of a Nobel Prize. She was in pursuit of pure knowledge. It was not that she was planning to walk backward for the next 30 years; it was that she wanted to know what would happen in somebody (not her) made that decision.

In an ideal society, these experimental urges would be gently harnessed in institutions of primary education. Not happening right now, worse luck. But we still have small girls walking backward. (Carroll, 1993, pp. 54–55)

Our work as literacy researchers requires that we "walk backward," as did the small girl, in ways that make sense to us individually based on the academic and scholarly traditions and cultures in which we live. That is, we each get to choose when and whether we want to be statisticians or storytellers (or even stand-up comics if we wish) and use the research traditions and approaches that match our propensities and the questions we want to ask. And the worth of our work shall be judged, as it always has been, by the review and critique of our peers. I believe our collective discourse serves us well when it both reflects and illumines our diverse world views. To confine our collective inquiry to one or two or three research paradigms is to close down the conversation and, ultimately, weaken us. Surely our knowledge will continue to expand, and we will continue to challenge one another as we negotiate toward and honor both shared understandings and clearly defined differences. I really cannot wait to see what we—and the junior high students of today—create for the NRC Program of 2018!

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