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Technologies and Truth Games: Research as a Dynamic Method

Currently language arts instruction is besieged and beleaguered by standards, curricula, and testing. As educators and researchers, we find ourselves struggling for the inclusion of children's and adolescent literature, writing for real purposes, and critical discussions, while our daily work is constantly interrupted by assessments and guidelines for the next standardized topic. My purpose in *Research Directions* is to offer a way of thinking about language arts instruction that critiques current reasoning, yet also provides a space to think outside of prevalent practices. I present a framework for both planning and studying literacy pedagogy that combines a practical everyday model of the reading process, reviewed in the first section, with Foucault's (1988c) theoretical concepts of technologies and truth games, described in the second. This combined framework is used to disrupt some of the reasoning that binds our practice to texts, methods, and student outcomes. Based on the framework, I pose research questions and invite further questions based on specific conditions of teaching.

ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORK: THE READING-WRITING PROCESS

As an organizational framework for conceptualizing various aspects of reading and language arts instruction, I draw upon a familiar paradigm for understanding how meaning making occurs. Four aspects of the reading comprehension process are depicted by the RAND Reading Study Group (2002) in Figure 1.

This model defines *reading comprehension* as the process of getting meaning from written language, and it consists of four interrelated elements: the *reader*, the *text*, the *activity*, and the *sociocultural context* in which the reading occurs. In this model, the reader brings something to the text (e.g., background experiences, knowledge,

skills); the text has particular characteristics and codes; and the activity defines what we are to do with the text (the purpose or outcome of a lesson). All of this occurs within a sociocultural context, including the social and cultural plane of the classroom, the teacher's expectations, and the students' identities and backgrounds as learners (Hammerberg [Hassett], 2004a).

For the larger field of language arts instruction, we can extend this model to "plug in" additional roles or activities beyond reading comprehension. For example, if the class *activity* is composing an alternative ending to a story, then the *reader* component of this chart could be renamed *writer*; the teacher might set up the *sociocultural context* of the classroom to allow for partner brainstorming or story-mapping; and the *text* being created would involve not only the conventions of writing allowable in the classroom (e.g., invented spelling or prewriting planning webs), but also the conventions of the story's genre, characters, setting, or

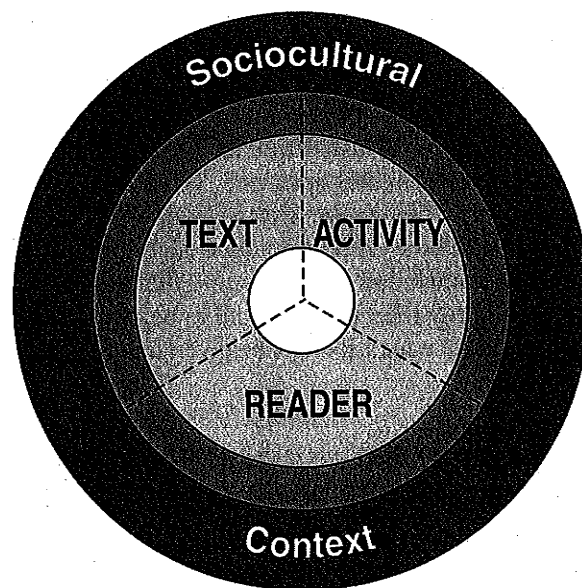


Figure 1. A heuristic for thinking about reading comprehension. Courtesy of the RAND Corporation. Used with permission.

word choices. As another example, if the *text* is a statewide mandated multiple-choice test, then the *reader* could be renamed *test-taker*; the *activity* would involve searching and scanning for least-wrong answers; and the *sociocultural context* of the classroom would be directly affected by larger rules of standardized test-taking, such as the typically helpful teacher confined to reading verbatim from a manual, the enforced silence of students in classrooms and hallways, and a ban on pencil-sharpening and bathroom breaks.

While it's fun (theoretically) to "plug and play" different activities, texts, or contexts into this model as a way to think about the inner workings and outputs of any language arts lesson, I focus here on how the inner workings and outputs of this model also define what a good student, good reader, good writer, or good test-taker looks like in any given moment. The types of texts we use, the range of activities that seem appropriate, or the manners of social interactions that are acceptable in any given context are contained by systems of reasoning that make some student behaviors, activities, texts, or contexts seem *more reasonable* than others.

There is often an educational imperative to think about what kids "ought to know" in terms of content, where kids "ought to be" in terms of development, or how kids "ought to behave" in terms of classroom management. In relation with this imperative, I am interested in the systems of reasoning that *define* what kids ought to know, what happens in language arts lessons, and why it seems reasonable to enact teaching and identities in these ways. My conceptual focus, then, turns to how language arts instruction is constructed and reasoned about in daily practice. To (re)examine the field of language arts, it is important first to figure out how current practice is confined to forms of knowledge and reasoning that are taken as given. Only then is it possible to begin to view language arts education as not-given and as open to change.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FOUCAULT'S TECHNOLOGIES

A starting point for reconsidering language arts education rests on the assumption that texts, readers, activities, or contexts are not fixed elements; instead, these elements of language arts learning vacillate, adapt, and change depending on

state and district policy, political reform efforts, and classroom demands. The entire category of "sociocultural context" is an example of how elements of the chart are not fixed. This category is a relatively recent addition to the chart and to an understanding of language arts, as researchers and teachers have come to recognize the importance of social, cultural, and linguistic factors in producing language arts instruction (Gee, 1996; Myers, 1996). Additionally, definitions of *text*, *reading*, *writing*, and *literacy* are not absolute (Graff, 1979, 1986; Myers, 1996), but instead, a matter of historical pushes and pulls, practical techniques for naming appropriate knowledge in classrooms, and social forms of reasoning that define best practice in any given time period or school institution.

Michel Foucault, a French philosopher, historian, and sociologist, offers some tools for understanding how social forms of reasoning, or the truths we choose to live by, are systematic and disciplining practices. In *Technologies of the Self* (1988c), he writes that "[t]he main point is not to accept this knowledge at face value but to analyze these so-called sciences as very specific 'truth games' related to specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves" (p. 18). He then names four technologies that function to delineate the knowledge used as "truth" in reasoning, the knowledge that functions as a "truth game":

- *technologies of production*, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things;
- *technologies of sign systems*, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification;
- *technologies of power*, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; and
- *technologies of the self*, which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (p. 18)

Foucault views these technologies as interrelated, and taken together, they help to form a corpus of reasoning techniques that human beings

use to organize and develop knowledge. While Foucault's definitions of "technologies" are never explicitly used in mainstream language arts pedagogy, classroom techniques of interventions, the schedules teachers follow daily, and/or the relations they're accustomed to in the classroom all fall within a matrix of practical reasoning about appropriate language arts instruction. And while Foucault (1979, 1990a, 1990b) didn't have language arts in mind when he used his concept of "technologies" to explain the construction of sexuality or the disciplining practices involved in clinics or prisons, the concept of "technologies" can be used as a way to understand the construction of an "appropriate learner" (or "appropriate teacher," for that matter) who lives within the discipline of language arts.

These technologies can be understood as tools (e.g., the sign system of alphabetic print is a tool for representing spoken language), or as techniques a person can use to get along in their world (e.g., the different affective practices people adopt when being a teacher, student, learner, parent, school board member, or principal—and the circumstances under which they adopt these roles). Foucault uses both the terms "techniques" and "technologies" interchangeably in his work (e.g., 1988a, p. 146; 1990b, p. 11). However, the term "technologies" denotes a sense of power or discipline. He writes that each of the four technologies is "associated with a certain type of domination," and that "each implies certain modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes" (Foucault, 1988c, p. 18). Indeed, in today's educational schemes, there is training and modification of individuals to "fit" into a lesson or text, to acquire certain skills, and to adopt certain attitudes or behaviors in the classroom (Hammerberg [Hassett], 2004b).

Foucault (1988c) also called each technology "a matrix of practical reasoning" (p. 18). Applied to the discipline of language arts, the interdependence among the four technologies can be thought of as formative of a larger matrix of practical reasoning that is used to make decisions about appropriate language arts education. Matrix, as a term, is used across a wide range of disciplines. In mathematics, it is a rectangular arrangement of objects (usually numbers) used to convert certain inputs (e.g., x and y) into outputs (e.g., a and b),

which can be generalized according to how the matrix functions. In logic, it operates as a truth-table, or as an expression that becomes a statement if its variables are replaced by constants. In biology, it is a medium, like a Petri dish, where something is bred or developed. In printing, it means a mold for casting type. In photography, it is a print relief used to transfer color to a final copy. Etymologically, the term "matrix" comes from the Latin word for womb, from "matre," meaning "mother," and "trix," indicating a feminized ending. Metaphorically, "matrix" is a useful concept to explain how educational reasoning within the discipline of language arts grows and flourishes while it simultaneously binds and constrains.

It is possible to think about a matrix metaphorically in any of these ways: as a single entity to solve multiple problems, as a "truth table" with inputs and outputs, as a mold, as a cast, as an imprint, as a medium where something grows. Whatever goes into the matrix results is a truth about good language arts methods, if "truth" is understood in Foucault's (1980) terms as "a system of ordered procedures for the production, distribution, and operation of statements" (p. 133). The knowledge we take as given may appear as truthful or factual based on the distribution of reasoning or the production of more research within the matrix. However, the statements and rationalizations that emerge from a matrix of reasoning are not actually "truths." Instead, they are historically and politically situated "truth games" that we take very seriously in our daily lives. For Foucault, a truth game "is an ensemble of procedures which lead to a certain result, which can be considered in function of its principles and its rules of procedure as valid or not, as winner or loser" (Gauthier, 1988, p. 15). For teachers and researchers, a truth game is played every single time we think about "what is best" for students in language arts education.

THE LITERACY MATRIX: AN INTEGRATED MODEL FOR DEVELOPING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As a research direction for planning and studying language arts education, I have related Foucault's four technologies to the familiar elements of reading and writing instruction (text, reader/writer, activity, and sociocultural context) shown

in Figure 2. I am proposing a “literacy matrix” of sorts, where different inputs and outputs delineate how teachers and researchers rationalize or work out what good language arts education is or ought to be. As a caveat, my readings of Foucault and my associations of his technologies to the various aspects of reading–writing processes are nothing more than a constructed tool to help me grapple with one of Foucault’s most significant messages: that relationships between power, knowledge, and discourse change throughout history, sometimes suddenly, sometimes slowly, but always related to the principles of truth operating in a given moment to establish what is considered acceptable.

Thinking back to the model of the reading–writing process described earlier, the principles of truth that human beings use to understand themselves restrict the field of language arts by way of the various technologies that imply “certain modes of training and modification” (Foucault, 1988c, p. 18). Technologies of *sign systems* train students toward understanding particular meanings, symbols, and texts. Technologies of *production* drive students to generate artifacts, measured outcomes, or their own texts through the language arts activities offered in schools. Technologies of the *self* modify students’ ways of being in the classroom in relation to the texts and activities in place. Even when students work against the activities and texts in the classroom, their behaviors

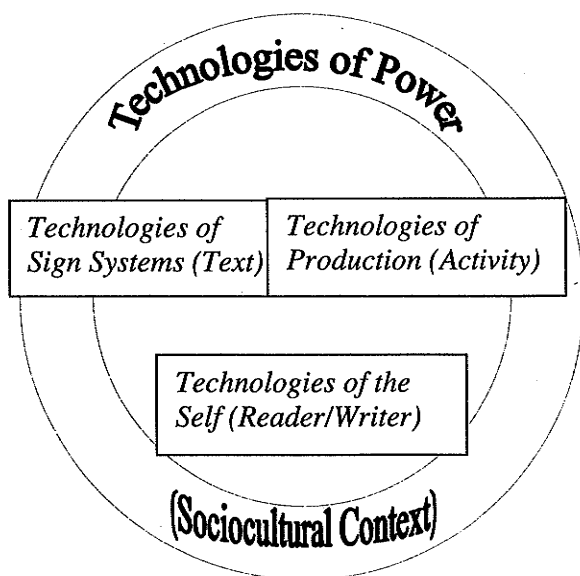


Figure 2. An application of Foucault’s four technologies to reading and writing instruction

and measured thoughts define them in relation to accepted and seemingly fixed norms. Thus, the techniques (or technologies) used to reason about language arts education all contribute to the truth games that operate to define language arts as a field and name its appropriate or best practices, for both teachers and students.

Truth games are played out in policy decisions as well as in the classroom. The outer circle, *technologies of power*, can be related to the larger sociocultural, historical, and political context in which language arts education is thought about and occurs. Social, political, and cultural technologies of power have always cultivated different ways of thinking, and some ways of reasoning have led to laws about what ought to be taught in schools. For example, Patrick Shannon (2007) points out that in the Colonial Period in the United States, the Old Deluder Satan Act of 1647 was “designed to enable individuals to fulfill their Protestant responsibilities to know the word of God and to learn proper religious behavior. In a sense, schooling was a device for promoting uniformity of thought and character based on the popular ideology of that time” (p. 3).

Today, policies and practices operate on more seemingly scientific truth games to define language arts practices (Hassett, 2006b, Shannon, 2007), resulting in acts such as Reading First and other laws that tighten control over the types of core programs, standards, and outcomes expected for education in the language arts. In many ways, the intent of these laws and standards is to make the outcomes of language arts instruction more predictable and uniform. So, in the year 2010, Shannon’s discussion of the Old Deluder Satan Act of 1647 is still relevant: “In a sense, schooling [is] a device for promoting uniformity of thought and character based on the popular ideology of [this] time” (p. 3).

To many researchers and educators, it may seem like we are “stuck” in a holding pattern around the perceived appropriateness of certain pedagogical approaches. The politics of beginning reading and writing instruction is pedagogically restrictive (Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1999, p. 4; Paterson, 1998), in that a major emphasis of elementary language arts is linked to rules of code-breaking without any consideration of the many other dimensions that make up early literacy learning. The research that supports the necessity of phonics, for example,

is not necessarily supported by evidence (Allington, 1997; Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1998a, 1998b). Yet, the perceived necessity of phonics takes on a life of its own through specific *techniques of reasoning*. In a politically charged field, expertise in the form of “consensus” creates a monopoly over the appropriateness of such instruction (Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1999; Benveniste, 1977). The matrix of practical reasoning about language arts creates continuing habits of thinking and understanding, so that in the end, what we do in schools appears to bear out its own evidence of what is right.

Technologies of power can be related to the sociocultural context of the classroom on two levels: first, through the mandates and requirements, which work to shape larger metrics of thinking; and second, through the ways we take up, push, and balance the mandates and requirements with other forms of instruction. At the level of the classroom, then, teachers and researchers alike have significant influence over the types of questions that can be asked regarding language arts instruction, including how different classroom environments might be established or how various texts and activities might be approached. These kinds of research and teaching decisions influence the purposes or goals of language arts instruction, and shape how students perceive their own roles in the classroom. In this way, it is possible to think of technologies of power, “which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination” (Foucault, 1988c, p. 18), as *productive* tools that do not function only through policy, curricula, or legislators. They function, also, through teachers and researchers.

Although teachers and researchers can (and often do) disapprove of the reasoning that goes into policy and practices, and although such complaints may seem fruitless given how bound we seem to be by approved and enforced techniques of reasoning, Foucault (1980) calls on our intellectual abilities to think outside the accepted truths of our time:

The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticize the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. [. . .] It's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of

power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time. (p. 133)

In light of this quote, it is possible to think of teachers and researchers as implicitly involved in the matrix of reasoning about language arts, but also as the very same people who can constitute “a new politics of truth” (Foucault, 1980, p. 133). Obviously, teachers and researchers have to choose their battles and continue to work within certain forms of reasoning that may be difficult to escape. However, in the integrated model that aligns Foucault’s technologies with aspects of the reading–writing process, a new politics of truth might begin to be constituted by detaching the choices made in language arts from any social, economic, and linguistic hegemony held by particular forms of reasoning.

Technologies of sign systems (texts) and technologies of production (activities) discipline educators toward paying attention to certain sign systems above others, certain reading and writing products over others. In turn, the texts and activity choices made in the classroom drive the making of a reader/writer (via technologies of the self). In the literacy matrix, all technologies work in sync: as students become “language arts learners” in the classroom, they are using technologies of the self to effect, by their “own” means, ways of thinking and being readers and writers. But in actuality, they are “swallowing” the texts and activities that are considered most appropriate in language arts at any given moment, making the pedagogy a part of their ways of thinking and reacting in the classroom. So, the question becomes: what kinds of literate selves are being made, and what kinds of pedagogies, texts, and activities are students swallowing?

In my own research, I use the literacy matrix to ask particular questions about current language arts instruction. For example, I have examined the ways in which technologies of sign systems currently involve an educational preoccupation with alphabetic print, both in the texts children are asked to read and the texts children are asked to produce. I have written about the effects of such a preoccupation: attaching a student’s desires, attitudes, and potential for success to alphabetic-print-assessment devices is dangerously limiting,

because the alphabetic sign system is only the partial bearer of meaning in an age of visual and interactive texts (Kress, 1999; Hassett, 2006a, 2006b). By training students to decode or find an author's meaning somewhere on the page, reading becomes associated with a laundry lists of benchmarks, as opposed to engagement in imaginative play, extended conversations, or constructions of meaning around literature (Hassett, 2008, 2009; Smagorinsky, 2001).

While the four technologies currently tie educational reasoning about success, progress, appropriate mentalities, and "natural" learning to texts with alphabetic writing systems, there is obviously room to think otherwise. In my own research and thinking, I have been drawn to texts with multiple modes of representation, and I have grown to question what happens when other types of texts are used. For example, I have explored semiotic theories as a way to point out the imaginative and interactive modes of communication available for children today, above and beyond print (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Kress, 2003; Hassett & Curwood, 2009; Siegel, 2006), and I have considered how highly interactive visual-texts indicate a profound shift in the nature of language arts education as a whole (Anstey, 2002; Goldstone, 2002, 2004; Hassett, 2010; Hassett & Schieble, 2007; Sipe, 1998, 2001).

So far, I have described some of my own questions and research interests, but it is important to examine other possible research directions. To use the literacy matrix as an integrated model to develop research and teaching questions, I invite researchers and teachers to imagine what might happen when the types of texts we choose to use in the classroom (via technologies of sign systems) trigger particular kinds of teaching activities (via technologies of production) and particular student thinking and acting (via technologies of the self). To discuss research as dynamic method, I turn to the ways researchers and teachers might "plug in" different questions, drives, passions, and politics.

Teachers and researchers know their own situations best, and they know what is most troubling about current practices (imposed or not) or ideas on what counts as education. So the goal here would be to find a place on the literacy matrix that is of most interest, and consider what truth games are in play, how the game(s) affect systems of reasoning writ large, and what rules of the game

need to be changed. Alternatively, a researcher or teacher might find a place on the literacy matrix that is most interesting and then consider a trajectory for the future, a new text to try, a definition of language arts that includes collaboration and debate, a different outcome for a student's sense of self vis-à-vis a new type of literacy.

It is significant to note that the entire January 2010 issue of *Language Arts* (Vol. 87, no. 3) was dedicated to the theme of who is reading and what is being read. The very existence of this issue of *Language Arts* tells me that technologies of power in general continue to maintain a way of reasoning about appropriate texts, sign systems, and products for classroom use. The tensions surrounding the types of texts that appear in classrooms continue to revolve around book selections for "language arts instruction" versus book selections for "enjoyment" (Graff, 2010). Sadly, the assumption that only certain materials can be used for instructional purposes continues to thrive. However, there is space to analyze the truth games at play within current reasoning. In fact, the authors in this volume have, in many ways, dynamically researched what happens for students and teachers when a range of texts is used in the classroom.

As a framework for thinking about research and practice, then, a model that integrates Foucault's technologies with common elements in language arts programming might work against the reasoning that binds us. I am not suggesting that we all move to Foucaultian analyses, but instead, that we think about and study what is usually understood as "given" or "true" in language arts curriculum and instruction, find the places where the reasoning is flawed or unhelpful, and work to move the field in new directions.

WEAK SPOTS IN THE REASONING: CONDUCTING RESEARCH AS DYNAMIC METHOD

In sum, the framework that I have suggested asks researchers and teachers to always be mindful of the technologies and truth games that simultaneously mold and discipline ways of thinking and being. The trick is to find the places where current reasoning has, borrowing from Foucault (1988b), weak points to mark and openings to notice from within the inertias and constraints of the present time (p. 184). As Foucault writes:

I dream of the intellectual who destroys evidence and generalities, the one who, in the inertias and constraints of the present time, locates and marks the weak points, the openings, the lines of force, who is incessantly on the move, doesn't know exactly where he is heading nor what he will think tomorrow for he is too attentive to the present. (Foucault, 1988b, p. 124)

In general, the research agenda I propose occurs on two levels. It begins with an analysis of the discursive constitution of particular "goods" in language arts education, such as "good learner" or "good language arts instruction." These discursive formations of what is "good" in language arts education sustain a "regime of truth" (Foucault, 1970, 1979, 1980), in that systems of ordered procedures—record keeping, developmental instruction, learning environments, assessments, grouping methods—govern our sense of ourselves as becoming-educated or as educators. This level of analysis is an epistemology of social knowledge (Popkewitz, 1991, 1998): research and practice that considers how it is that we have come to know what we know and think the way we think about language arts instruction truly pushes us to consider and study the grounds of everyday knowledge with reference to its social and historical limits.

On the second level, the research agenda I propose not only challenges current reasoning, but also challenges us to locate places in our reasoning that have "weak spots," or potential for change. Dwight & Garrison (2003) write that "[d]ynamics refers to something's latent potential or power for change; it is the capacity for something to become other than what it is" (p. 710). In this way, research can be seen as a dynamic method that asks how language arts instruction can become something other than what it is. Analyzing and outlining the limits of current pedagogical practices through Foucault's four technologies challenges current reasoning, but it is up to researchers and practitioners to systematically break up the evidence and generalities we take as given, and approach language arts from a different vantage point. This type of research can be seen, then, as a dynamic method for changing practice.

By "dynamic method," I mean to say that there are no predetermined "appropriate" research questions to ask, no particular research methodologies

that would move the field forward in better ways than others. Case studies, ethnographies, discourse analyses, or quasi-experimental designs all have potential for examining various elements of the literacy matrix (reader/writer, text, activity, context) and uncovering places where there are possibilities for change. In my mind, though, research as a dynamic method for change rests on two questions that can only be answered by educators and researchers, via the means considered by them to be most useful: What evidence and generalities that operate within the field of language arts do you most want to destroy? What weak points, openings, and lines of force do you notice from your own vantage point that could most lead to change?

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