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What is the Role of NCRLL in the New Millennium?

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Literacy research has now been conducted for over a century. The study of reading began in nineteenth century France and Germany, stimulating an interest in the scientific study of reading in the U.S. The first U.S. study of reading was published in 1884, with the initial dissertation in reading completed in 1917. Writing research was first published in the U.S. in 1902, with the earliest composition dissertation defended in 1927.

During the early years of literacy research, studies were conducted sporadically and researchers worked in relative isolation. One of the key developments in establishing the kinds of scholarly networks necessary to support and sustain research fields was the development of professional organizations through which people could share their work. In 1911, NCTE was founded by members of the English Round Table of the Secondary Section of the National Education Association. This feisty group was energized by their protests against the efforts of colleges to institute entrance requirements that in effect dictated the secondary English curriculum. NCTE's early leadership and emphasis derived from the interests of its secondary school founders. Researchers in elementary language arts felt marginalized within NCTE—the International Reading Association was not established till 1956—and its secondary English focus. In 1932 a small and distinguished group of elementary researchers within NCTE

formed The National Conference on Research in Elementary School English (NCRLL's original name, quickly changed to the National Conference on Research in English) in order to provide themselves and their interests with greater political and scholarly voice. Researchers oriented to secondary and postsecondary schooling were soon admitted to their august company.

In its founding, and throughout much of its history, NCRE was an explicitly and proudly elitist organization with a clear purpose. In its early years membership was limited to 25 people. As recalled by Lou LaBrant in Water Petty's History of NCRE (available at <http://www.coe.uga.edu/ncrll/Publications/Downloads.htm>), "The original group was small and remained so till in the 40s. It was [1932-1940 Secretary-Treasurer C. C.] Certain's idea that the number should be limited, to permit all of the members to sit around a dining table at the annual meeting and report and discuss informally" (p. 61). As the only research-oriented group derived from the only professional organization for English/language arts educators, its mission was to lead the field in the systematic study of the teaching and learning of literacy, a goal toward which it proceeded with undisputed stature and unchallenged authority.

Quarterly was not launched till 1965, Research in the Teaching of English

till 1967, Journal of Reading Behavior/ Journal of Literacy Research till 1969; the 1980s and 90s then saw a proliferation of journals to which a literacy researcher could submit a study, review, or theoretical paper. To create the scholarly outlet that the field as a whole did not provide, NCRE established a publication program (see <http://www.coe.uga.edu/ncrll/Publications/NCRLLPublications.htm>) that served as a vital and essential source of research for the field. For many years, then, NCRE was a unique and indispensable organization for maintaining research interests, developing research conversations, establishing research networks, and publishing the fruits of research activity.

Seventy years after its founding, however, NCRLL does not have the unique status it once possessed. Other organizations are available to join for networking and support. Electronic listserves now provide 24/7 conversations once experienced but annually among the elite around the NCRE dinner table. Conference programs are better structured to support researchers. Specialized conferences are held every month around the globe. Journals abound and book publishers produce scores of new titles each year. OERI-funded research centers—the Center for the Study of Reading, the Center

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for the Study of Writing and Literacy, the Center for the Teaching and Learning of Literature, the National Reading Research Center, the Center for English Learning and Achievement, the Center for the Improvement in Early Reading Achievement—have been in operation since 1976. AERA provides SIGS and sections that enable contacts and connections. Membership in NCRL now numbers in the hundreds, opening the organization to a more democratic makeup but diluting the prestige once accorded to inclusion. With NCRL now but one of many research-oriented organizations in operation, we must ask ourselves, what is the role and relevance of NCRL at this point in its history? What is the rationale for NCRL and what should it be doing to justify its existence? The too-early, too-expensive breakfasts at the NCTE fall and IRA spring conferences are wonderful congregations but hardly reason to stay in business. What niche does NCRL fill now in a scholarly world filled with organizations, outlets, and opportunities?

This question became the topic of discussion at the session following the breakfast at the spring 2001 IRA meeting in New Orleans. Several past NCRE/NCRL officers weighed in on the organization's future. Texts of their provocative talks follow, after which I'll return to comment on how the executive board is considering how to shape NCRL's vision and activities in the coming years in light of the current state of the field.

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Some Thoughts on Directions for NCRL at the Beginning of the 21st Century

**David Bloome
Vanderbilt University**

I am thankful to Peter Smagorinsky for bringing together a group of people to stimulate our thinking about future directions for NCRL. As I see it, NCRL can and should play a major role in promoting and provoking the intellectual imagination of researchers of language and literacy. Indeed, NCRL may be the only organization and institutional entity in a position to do so.

In my view, the need for promoting and provoking the intellectual imagination of the field is especially critical at this point in our history. I worry that our field is becoming calcified. The proliferation of handbooks, encyclopedias, blue panel reports, and white papers may be evidence of a field focused on solidification rather than imagination. Too often, reports of research appear to be little more than given theories in search of supporting data, the reiteration of entrenched positions, or methodological eloquence producing

facts of little consequence. Our desire for grants and the prestige they bring has allowed politicians and corporate executives too much influence over the questions and lines of inquiry that drive the field.

NCRL's history gives it a warrant for provoking the imagination of the field. NCRL started out as a small group of researchers who sought to encourage a research presence in NCTE. As NCRL, then NCRE, expanded it often seemed that the major rationale for being a member was to get one's name in the membership book. As the membership of NCRE became larger, questions were raised about elitism and whiteness and whether that functioned to promote research or hinder it. I mark the major change in NCRL with an invited lecture given by Karla Holloway who challenged NCRL to address the changes brought about by the new students showing up in our teacher education classes and doctoral programs. She challenged us to imagine a broader agenda than access, assimilation, and the reproduction of the status quo and of ourselves. And NCRL took up that challenge, opening up its membership and leadership and expanding the discussion on what constituted research and knowledge. As a consequence, elitism is no longer a driving rationale for NCRL. But we are yet to move to the next step, that of imagining a broader agenda than access, reproduction, and assimilation.

The future of NCRL is bright if we can emphasize the role of imagination and possibility in research on language and literacy. Perhaps this means closer ties with the humanities and the arts; perhaps it means challenging ourselves further with regard to taken-for-granted assumptions about research, knowledge, and the infrastructure of

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our field. In my view, there are few places for language and literacy researchers to safely invest in creativity, to challenge what we think we know, or to think deeply about the meaning of what we do as a field. In my view, such an organizational agenda would constitute much needed leadership.

Future Directions for NCRL

Karin L. Dahl

The Ohio State University

I believe that NCRL has a vital role to play in informing current debates about educational issues in literacy. Our stance as an organization has traditionally been a neutral one, yet these times call for us to speak out effectively and move toward political awareness. As the leading organization of literacy researchers nationally we can illumine selected literacy issues, work to increase the political awareness of educators, and mobilize researchers to effectively influence political discourse about literacy instruction. We need to be inside the national discussion, even if we have to elbow our way in, and we need to be ready with information. Part of our work as an organization in my view is to follow key issues closely and work to have an impact on the debate.

To get the discussion started about how to accomplish such a goal I am suggesting three possibilities. First, why not have focused sessions at our national meetings that bring together a range of perspectives on a single key issue? Our time together could be a rich discussion informed by a few speakers and by data that they put on the table. I'd like to see annotated reference lists that identify significant research and handouts that present essential concepts on an issue. Our work in such sessions would be to deliberate, to work with ideas and differences. In these discussions or in separate breakout groups we could expand what we know and think together, exploring possible courses of action.

Second, I think we could have working sessions at conventions where NCRL members develop position documents that could later be posted on our website, discussed among members, and used as possible documents to inform decision makers. The working sessions could bring together NCRL researchers to think and write together. The products could be position papers, or brief concept sheets that could be distributed.

Third, I think we should explore various new ways to publish research-based documents that get to the heart of key issues and serve the field. These could be consumer friendly fastback publications that have a tone of speaking to an immediate need with sound research-based information or they could be newsletters that would serve as handouts for educators. There also may be cyberspace options to explore. Could there be a featured issues part of our NCRL website where various kinds of publications are available?

In summary, I am suggesting that we take action as an organization and that we get in the discussion about important literacy education issues with information in usable forms. I think these activities would enliven NCRL and influence thinking about the literacy issues of the day.

A Conference in Search of an Agenda

Timothy Shanahan

University of Illinois at Chicago

We have a problem. The National Conference on Research in Literacy and Language (NCRL), with its long and illustrious history, its impressive membership role, and its clear dedication to scholarly achievement in literacy and language, seems to have nothing to do. More specifically, NCRL appears to have nothing to do that is not already being done quite well by many other groups—in fact, by many groups that NCRL members belong to.

NCRL at various times in educational history has been an exceptionally important group in spite of its small size and uncertain status. When the major professional organizations in literacy, such as the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association, did little with research and there were no other groups such as the National Reading Conference or the Society for the Study of Reading dedicated entirely to literacy research, almost anything that NCRL did was of some significance to the field. However, we now have a solid research infrastructure—no, not everything that we need perhaps, but much more than existed when NCRE, now NCRL, began.

So what is it that researchers need that an organization such as NCRL could provide? We need places where we can talk. We need places where we can tell about our studies and where we can hear about the studies of others. We need places where we can push our work and our minds forward through conversation. Over the years, in lots of different venues and formats, NCRL has sponsored meetings—excellent meetings. But a veritable alphabet soup of organizations—IRA, NCTE, NRC, AERA, SSR, CRA, and CCCC all have meetings, as do their various affiliate groups, committees, as-semblies, and state and regional organizations. One more meeting now and again can be a good idea, but it is not a sufficient purpose for an organization like NCRL.

Researchers also need places to publish their theories and research and they need to be able to buy or borrow or make available to their students the stuff that researchers have produced. NCRL has published a number of classic works over the years, works that have generated income that has allowed for activities well beyond the means of our membership budget. However, I would have to say that we have ample numbers of journals

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dedicated strictly to the publication of research, such as *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Journal of Literacy Research*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Yearbook of the National Reading Conference*, *Written Communication*, and so on, as well as many other journals that take the role of translating research into practice. Many university, scholarly, and commercial publishers, as well as professional organizations publish scholarly books on literacy and language, too. NCRLI can publish an occasional book that would be valuable, but I would argue that is not enough of a purpose for an organization like this one.

We have a small membership and a relatively small budget, so funding specific studies is out of the question even if we wanted to do it, and again, there are lots of funding sources in government and in our professional organizations so that probably isn't our role either. And while we can give research awards and other recognitions, these would be an insufficient reason to continue as an independent organization.

Of course, we can attempt to address policy issues, and there are certainly more than enough important issues of research support and governance issues in education, but still again I believe that given our size, our geographical diversity, and our lack of full time leadership, we are unlikely to have a big impact on policy issues and would be better off doing that work through our other larger organizations that are better equipped for this type of thing.

So is there nothing of value for NCRLI to contribute? One possibility would be to attempt influence and establish research agendas for the field. Who is determining which questions have been answered adequately and which are begging to be answered? I think NCRLI should consider organizing a conference and a publication around

this issue every five years. The NCRLI president should appoint a voluntary commission that would work in concert with other organizations to set research agendas. We should share in the royalties of any publication that results from this work, and we could hold at least one conference on the agenda that results.

This publication and conference could serve as a lighthouse for young scholars and a reminder to government agencies and professional organizations—as well as to our own members—about the state of research in our field. This kind of effort can serve as an important counterweight to the current agenda setting that is left entirely or almost entirely to Washington bureaucrats. It will have the benefit of being self-sustaining and it will involve in an active way a greater proportion of our membership than is now possible.

Organizations must have some common purpose that members can join in. At the current time, NCRLI lacks such a common purpose. The development of research agendas and directions for the field is a valuable and unique role, currently played by no professional organization in the field. NCRLI could improve its status by trying to fill this vacuum—and it would be doing so in a fashion that is consistent with its history.

Reprise

Peter Smagorinsky

In the past few years, the NCRLI executive board has tried to help redefine the organization's purpose and how its activities can better work to meet its goals. The following initiatives illustrate the board's efforts to revitalize NCRLI:

- **Board meetings:** Executive board meetings have become institutionalized at the NCTE fall and IRA spring conventions to replace the informal meetings previously held.
- **Web site:** The NCRLI website (<http://www.coe.uga.edu/ncrll/index.html>) provides the organization's history, publications, past and current

programs, and a growing collection of pdf versions of out-of-print books available for downloading. Ideas on how to improve the website are always welcome; contact

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• **Publications:** JoBeth Allen, Donna Alvermann, and David Reinking now serve as the editors of the NCRLI Literacy Research Series, a series of books on research methodology that includes the following forthcoming titles:

- *Philosophical and Theoretical Foundations of Interpretive Research*, George Kamberelis and Greg Demitriodis
- *Case Study*, Anne Haas Dyson and Celia Genishi
- *Ethnography*, Shirley Brice Heath
- *Mixed Qualitative/Quantitative*, Karin Dahl
- *Critical Theories Based*, Arlette Willis
- *Narrative*, David Schaafsma
- *Discourse Analysis*, David Bloome et al.

• *Action Research*, Marian Mohr

The executive board has also discussed the possibility of initiating other research series. Two requirements are necessary in order for additional series to be launched: (1) an editor or editorial team must make a commitment to produce the series (if you have ideas, please contact the NCRLI executive board); (2) NCRLI must work to establish an ongoing relationship with a publisher committed to producing the series.

• **Conference:** The executive board has established a triennial conference to coincide with the Research Chair's term of office (now 3 years). The Research Chair (currently Victoria Purcell-Gates) will plan the conference in conjunction with the President elected during the year of the Research Chair's (Peter Smagorinsky). The first of these conferences will be held in 2003; details forthcoming.

We welcome ideas from the membership about the role of NCRLI in the coming years. We also welcome nominations for potential officers who have the vision and energy to set and meet the organization's goals in the years ahead.