

# Critique and Fiction: Doing Science Right in Rural Education Research

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*This essay explains the relevance of fiction to the practice of rural education research, in so doing engaging questions about the nature and purposes of research and, therefore, of science itself. Although many may assume science and fiction (in this account, novels) harbor contrary purposes and devices, this essay argues that, to the contrary, such a view damages research efforts. This damage is palpable in rural education research because of the meanings inherent in rural lifeways. Fiction provides a route to the critique needed to engage rural questions with authenticity and, therefore, with objectivity. Disregard of critique is nonetheless the official standard in education research. The argument here is thus widely applicable throughout education practice, research, and theorizing precisely because critique remains an alien concept in mainstream education research. The essay explains why critique is both important and overlooked, how novels contribute to critique in rural education research, and how to do critique relevant to empirical research.*

## Introduction

The commendation of fiction as a means of strengthening critique in rural education research may seem dubious to many colleagues. After all, in the common misconceptions that have prevailed for hundreds or even thousands of years, fiction has been regarded, at best, as irrelevant and, at worst, the enemy of systematic inquiry; that research is serious work, whereas fiction is an entertaining diversion. Another mistaken belief is that research has method and fiction has inspiration. And yet another misconception holds that fiction is lies, and systematic inquiry (the meaning of the word *science*) is truth. Plato held this perspective, and what greater authority could a view enjoy?

To determine, then, what makes rural education research *research* (cf. Coladarci, 2007) some colleagues

may think it altogether better to conduct an empirical study showing how rural education research fails to conform to some set of research standards claimed as valid on some authority, perhaps that of the Institute of Education Sciences, or perhaps, more liberally, those proposed by the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2006). Such a view has some merit. The difficulty is that it accepts a claim I wish to contest, namely that such a process will make our research more like *their* research—that of the authority. Argument by authority is a typical move in the social sciences. And a dangerous one, for reasons that will surely become clear by the end of the essay.

I'm in favor of better quality, and certainly in my own work. But even with better quality, rural education

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<sup>1</sup>But novels are serious (Philip Roth isn't joking in *American Pastoral*); luminously truthful (Wendell Berry, and also Leo Tolstoy insist that novels ought to teach lessons); and difficult work (for authors who write them). The analysis given in this paper, however, is by no means postmodern. The essay's outlook is more nearly "post-positivist;" that is, it embraces such concepts as reality, objectivity, reliability and validity, approximations of truth about the social world, and usefulness, generally, in the world it would have research study better.

research should be less and less like “their” research in some important respects having to do with the rural theory (e.g., Coladarci, 2007; Howley, 1997) That is, the meanings of rural lives and communities are what make rural education research *rural*—not a geographic boundary, low population density, or remoteness. Those meanings, and not predominately the meanings of generic pedagogies, generic curricular theorizing, or generic administrative or policy studies, are the substance the field must uniquely engage to be a field at all. Otherwise, the only education research conducted in rural communities will be research that has nothing rural about it except that the study author will identify the “site” as rural (cf. Coladarci, 2007).

Rural theory, moreover, suggests a path of methodological improvement additional to faithful adherence to generic research standards. What blazes that path? What might provide the needed connection to rural meanings? The answer is “critique,” as the next section will explain.

### Critique

Critique is needed in *all* research efforts to assess concepts, constructs, dilemmas, contentions, and outright controversies as they might apply to generating research questions, selecting or devising methods, analyzing data, interpreting results, and making recommendations. Other than through critique, it is difficult to see how one might approach issues on which most of a field is conflicted or, worse still, silent; or which seem unimportant or trivial to colleagues studying primarily other things (instruction, curriculum, administration, technology, or professional preparation instead of rural education proper). Lacking critique, in fact, one defaults easily to the conventional concerns of those other fields or to the conventional wisdom of one’s own field. For this reason editors of rural journals routinely suffer manuscripts whose only rural connection is that the studies they report happen quite incidentally to be conducted in a location identified as rural (Coladarci, 2003).

Critique, then, is one way—arguably the only way—to distinguish rural education research as *research*. Though it is strange to report, critique is a largely ignored concept in American education research. The word *critique* does not appear, for instance, *even once* in AERA’s proposed standards for reporting education research (AERA, 2006), which are among the more liberal prevailing in the field. AERA’s oversight is therefore telling, and it must be immensely troubling to anyone who believes that critique

<sup>2</sup>The turn to critique is not by any means proposed here as a radical alternative. It is equally useful to all sorts of thoughtful outlooks and quite useless to thoughtless ones, whatever the political allegiance. There is excellent conservative, liberal, and radical critique.

has a generative role in research of whatever sort, but especially including that uniquely politically charged, inter- and cross-disciplinary endeavor of ours—education—and, within education, especially, such fields as rural education, urban education, American Indian education, informal education, and experiential education. These fields are not just sites of technical problems of reading and math instruction and curriculum design, special markets for computers, or vexing problems for policy making (and makers). They are fields that invite connections with larger issues and larger questions.

Though critique is important for ensuring quality in all scientific research efforts (including natural science), it is of the essence in research fields dealing with society, economics, culture, community, health, and education. It seems especially apt to the vision of education as a social endeavor that engages the common good, as contrasted, perhaps, to private greed. Critique *enables the substance* of these fields and *informs their methods* of empirical study. The essay will proceed to explain how this is so.

### What is Critique?

Dictionary definitions of the word *critique* are sketchy, even imprecise. The one in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) is actually inadequate: “An essay or article of criticism of a *literary* (or, more rarely, an artistic) work; a review” [emphasis added] (OED, 1971, p. 606). This sort of critique—criticism of a single work—is the one to which most doctoral students are introduced in colleges of education. I have myself assigned this project to students. Most students find the assignment a challenge and characteristically confuse the task at hand with something they are more familiar with: a book report. We are dealing with a nearly ubiquitous cultural silence and not merely with a momentary lapse at AERA.

The *Third International Dictionary* offers this definition for critique: “a critical examination or estimate of a thing or situation (as a work of art or literature) with a view to determining its nature and limitations or its conformity to standards” [emphasis added] (Mish, 1984, p. 539). This American definition is somewhat better than its historically earlier British cousin, but it, too, identifies critique as an aesthetic exercise—much in line with OED, which, however, slights art in favor of literature.

Wikipedia (2006) does considerably better than the print dictionaries, however. It is, after all, a real-time collaborative encyclopedia and so its editing is not limited to a 50- or 100-year cycle. Wikipedia offers the following statement, a section of its entry for *critic* [I have added emphasis to point out key concepts]:

<sup>3</sup>That is, in a liberal estimate, about 1928, the publication date of the OED’s last printed installment

A critique is a systematic inquiry into the conditions and consequences of a concept or set of concepts, and an attempt to understand its limitations. A critical perspective is, in this sense, the opposite of a dogmatic one” [emphasis added]. (Wikipedia, 2006, para. 7)

This formulation is far, far more helpful than the dictionary entries for *critique*, and the words I have emphasized in the passage tell why: critique is *systematic inquiry* (one definition of the word *science*) that judges the varied *limitations* of ideas, dilemmas, issues, questions, problems, and contradictions in a *prominently non-dogmatic way*. Wikipedia also avoids using the word “critical” to define *critique* and usefully contrasts “critical” with its opposite, “dogmatic”.

Surely, the project of critique is germane to the conduct of all systematic study, including the natural and the social sciences, as well as to empirically grounded systematic study (i.e., research proper) in education. This sort of critique goes far beyond mere criticism, including the predictable criticism of the predictable faults common to single studies. Critique is altogether something else.

#### What Does Critique Do?

Critique has an extremely, first, practical function in the conduct of empirical research. It is where empirical questions come from (at the inception of a study’s idea) and, second, where evaluations and interpretations of findings come from (at the conclusion of a study’s effort). The origin of research questions in critique (or more properly, the origin in critique of *insights* that lead to research questions), combined with the failure of education research to acknowledge the concept of critique, helps explain why doctoral students usually flounder when attempting to define a dissertation question. They confront a nearly insurmountable challenge. They are equipped with neither the disposition for critique, nor its intellectual tools.

Practical evaluations and theoretical interpretations of findings are also best articulated with critique. To take a very familiar example, suppose a quantitative study has actually rejected the null hypothesis. The common temptation is to cry “Eureka!” and be done with it, repeating the findings in a short concluding section and, by way of practical recommendations, telling educators to honor the finding in what they do, and researchers in following up on the finding. What’s needed, instead, is a critique that sets the findings back in the context of the silences, gaps, dilemmas, and controversies from whence the question asked ideally came. Alas, most questions do not originate in such critique and the related findings cannot therefore be evaluated in terms of those silences, gaps, dilemmas, and controversies.

Especially in education, research reports are obliged

to articulate such matters. Why? Because teachers, administrators, and the makers of policy are not obliged to believe the claimed findings of researchers, and because teachers and administrations are decidedly not under any obligation to honor all the sundry findings of all the sundry researchers! For good reason, they need convincing. Aside from conducting a competent study, then, researchers must interpret the many ambiguities and contingencies that bear on the use of what they claim to have found. To judge from published studies, many researchers lack the capacity systematically to inquire about the limitations of the facts, concepts, dilemmas, or outright mysteries surfaced in their studies, much less to judge the practical implications for people embedded in diverse real worlds. This lack of critique in “discussion sections” of research reports partly explains why “research findings” remain untrustworthy in actual circumstances where they might otherwise, if a practitioner were sufficiently crazy or desperate, be applied.

Critique in the social sciences, from this vantage, is the realization of an intellectual obligation at the very core of the research project, with momentous implications for perspicacious application. Inadequate critique, on this view, is perhaps the most serious threat to validity in education research, albeit a largely unrecognized one.

#### Novels as an Approach to Critique in Rural Education Research

Most lives are spent in the thrall of dogmas of one stripe or another, and this aspect of the human condition makes systematic inquiry extremely difficult, even in natural science, as the history of science itself so clearly suggests: Dogmas disable critique. Both in the presence and absence of knowledge, that is what they are *for*. AERA’s silence on critique is but one indication of the extent to which our thinking as educationists cleaves to dogmas. In this case, though, it may be more self-interest than dogma: Critique is something anyone with a sharp mind might do, whereas professionally established theory awaits convenient appropriation by those playing the complete academic game in an effort to rise all the way to tenure on the shoulders of homo academicus. In research, dogma is supported in this way through a heavily trafficked back door. Real critique can be an inconvenient impediment to the rise of a junior faculty member.

#### What Does Dogma Do?

One can argue that propagating critical incapacity is the point of much schooling, and not only the point of

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<sup>4</sup>Adams was writing of all schooling (including his experience at Harvard) under the provocation of visits to Prussian schools in the 19th century.

effective dogmas. Henry Adams, historian and scion of American presidents, wrote in his autobiography that schooling itself “is a sort of dynamo machine for polarizing the popular mind; for turning and holding its lines of force in the direction supposed to be most effective for state purposes” (Adams, 1918/1992, para. 14). We can take Adams’s assessment as comparatively sober, but many others have given it, in the past half-century, along with growing and convincing detail (e.g., Arendt, 1954/1968; Aronowitz, 2008; Brown, 1991; Goodman, 1962; Greene, 1982).

By the time education practitioners in the U.S. have come to the doctoral experience, they have thus enjoyed a career and a half of bombardment by dogma—from their K-12 schooling, from SEAs, central offices, professional associations, and, yes, also from university faculty. Within their chosen field, they’ve received an especially thorough American miseducation in the opposite of critique. Indeed, many newly enlisted doctoral students want, in essence, to pose the following question in their dissertations-to-be: “How can we do what they want us to do?” This question is not very remote from the sorts that too many seasoned education researchers pose in their studies, either, and often with uncommonly good funding. The regime is arguably quite interested to displace broad and systematic inquiry (science) with quite narrowly focused engineering tasks.

Now, when research questions come mostly or entirely from dogma, the doubt that is presumed to be the foundation of science (i.e., systematic inquiry) serves as window-dressing, and not as the generative spirit of the enterprise. Lacking doubt, scientific inquiry fails—utterly. It fails so well in the social sciences because dogma is especially easy to repeat and so convenient for the realization of self-interest.

The great originator of English natural science, Francis Bacon himself, well knew such things. Bacon’s *Novum Organum* (Bacon, 1620/1863) is among the first critiques to propose and describe the methods of natural science and the importance of doubt and logic. His 29th aphorism, in Book One of the *Novum Organum*, puts it well. He wrote (Bacon, 1620/1863, para. 36), “In sciences founded on opinions and dogmas... the object is to command assent to the proposition, not to master the thing.” Writing 325 years later, the novelist George Orwell (1949) had Winston Smith, the doomed protagonist of 1984, claim that freedom was the freedom to put two and two together.

Each writer was speaking about the interplay of dogma, doubt, and reason: about *critique* and in particular about

<sup>5</sup>There’s a hidden irony here: IES’s insistence on randomized controlled experiments imposes a stringent doubtfulness toward the varied dogmas of the field, but only when the dogmas are manifested as “interventions.” Although the extreme narrowness of the IES stance is a critique of sorts, it operates hardly at all on ideas but rather on objects (“interventions”).

the relationship of these matters to varied manifestations

of authority in contests about truth (e.g., the Church, Big Brother, or in our case, those promoting generic professional dogmas and a version of science without critique). A founder of natural science and one of the greatest critics of its misuse in the 20th century seem to have more in common than one might suspect

#### Rural Meanings and the Project of Fiction

Some of us have written that features that make rural education research rural arise in the everyday lives of rural people and communities, over time, and are manifest as meanings and practices attached to everyday life. We have often advised that education researchers attend to these matters. This advice, not surprisingly, has been both welcomed and resisted. Acting on it, though, is difficult if a study cannot engage critique—for precisely the reasons given above, that is, the twin difficulty of determining a question and of rendering a critical account of findings. If one can’t see the question, one won’t ask it, and not asking it, one will lack the subsequent capacity to report relevant findings. One will instead report irrelevant findings.

What shall we do to help rural education researchers develop the capacity for critique? Add another research methods course in doctoral programs? Should the AERA Rural Education Special Interest Group offer an extended professional development training course at AERA? I don’t think such steps advisable, and the reasons should be obvious (i.e., neither rural nor critique is well regarded in education research nor much considered in doctoral programs).

I recommend, instead, reading rural fiction as a bootstrap way to get real, which was a chief concern with Francis Bacon. The counsel is at least consistent with science in this way (i.e., getting real). Dianne Peters (1982) advised researchers to read rural novels as a *different way* of knowing about rural life. Here, the counsel is methodological: critique as a way to bridge two ways of knowing (literature and science, as per Kelly Cherry in the epigraph) for the explicit benefit of scientific *method* in rural education research. Critique, in short, is the methodological bridge, and fiction one way to help jump-start critique.

Whether one is natively rural, a migrant, or a more abstractly curious scholar, reading rural fiction is more than an antidote. It supplies us all with missing or marginalized experience; as in the epigraph, fiction, especially excellent fiction, is an authentic representation of reality. If one was raised rural, as some of us were, reading rural novels can refresh personal experience—in the sense of pushing back against the dogmas picked up during the years of generic practice and professional preparation and development to

<sup>6</sup>My recommendation of the novel, moreover, is hardly intended to exclude drama, poetry, or film as sources for insight to the ordinary lives of ordinary humans.

which we are all subject. And cosmopolitan academics

The most proper reading of *The Two Cultures* is as

who have not ever lived in rural places need something more than a brief sojourn in a rurally-sited university town to prepare them to conduct rural education research. Rural novels might not be enough, but they are a much better start than the *idols of the tribe* (Bacon, 1620/1863).

Of course, one must have or develop a taste for fiction to act on the counsel. This difficulty shouldn't be too much, though, for people who have already developed a taste for reading the sorts of materials that ordinary people regard as excruciatingly boring (evaluation reports, technical reports, blue-ribbon panel reports, peer-reviewed scholarly articles, national and state standards documents, administrative memos, compendia of university regulations, NCATE portfolios, and so forth).

Nonetheless, one does, in our field, encounter people who steadfastly decline to read novels. The British physicist and novelist C.P. Snow in *The Two Cultures* (1959/1993) commented on the challenge. One passage in which Snow characterizes the differences between the scientific and literary cultures of that time and place bears on the argument on offer in this essay. Snow observed,

As one would expect, some of the very best scientists had and have plenty of energy and interest to spare, and we came across several who had read everything that literary people talk about. But that's very rare. Most of the rest, when one tried to probe for what books they had read, would modestly confess, "Well, I've *tried* a bit of Dickens," rather as though Dickens were an extraordinarily esoteric, tangled and dubiously rewarding writer, something like Rainer Maria Rilke [original emphasis]. (Snow, 1959/1993, p. 12)

Some minds, of course, prefer works that represent factual matters, such as history. Good rural history is surely fine preparation for critique, too, but even good history often fails to report much about *everyday rural experience*. There are a few exceptions, but not comparatively very many.

One might imagine that natural science (as opposed to social science) could dispense with such an outlook. But on second thought the applications of natural science in everyday life do indeed represent a realm in which lack of such reading is a likely handicap. Increasingly, the noble pursuit of scientific knowledge for its own sake has been abandoned in favor of rapid applications to product development, a fervor that would seem to render science less democratic in the contemporary world than Snow might have imagined it would become. The turn to engineering in education science—the IES view of product testing—harbors similar dangers.

a repudiation of the forms of class-prejudice observable during the first half of the 20th century in English culture generally. Snow and Orwell would not have been too far apart on these matters, in fact. Snow's own story can easily be understood as an affirmation to read novels—of the sort to be recommended, at any rate, and for the purposes described. Good rural novels also have the comparative advantage of being crafted. I mean that many novelists, if not most, are also engaged in their own sort of critique—this is how, in part, they decide what to write about and how to present their characters, including the dilemmas they face, the resources they use, and the fates to which decisions and circumstance lead them.

Equally important, novels are partial re-inventions of the record of everyday life and the real concerns of everyday people. This possibility was opened by the novel's famed individualistic content, originally used to display the lives of society's bourgeois elite, but increasingly representing ordinary people over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. The inventions are partial because no story is ever created out of whole cloth; authors draw on their own lives and on the lives they observe. Indeed, verisimilitude (attempt to depict the real), is the founding principle of the novel itself (Watt, 1957). Novels that treat *rural* themes generally adhere closely to the project of verisimilitude. This is a virtue from which the writing of researchers might also benefit.

The *modern novel* as compared to *contemporary* social science research also commends itself for its longer concern for everyday rural life: The rise of the modern novel (ca. 1700) substantially precedes the rise of contemporary social science research (ca. 1900). Although contemporary quantitative social science research certainly does have its roots in the advent of political economy (e.g., Adam Smith, 1776) and sociology (e.g., August Comte, 1830-1842), until social science per se could in fact take a formalized account of empirical variability (Francis Galton, 1869), it necessarily remained more interpretive and philosophical than empirical, and its use of data more illustrative than systematic—a critique that has been deployed (see, e.g., Heilbroner, 1980), for instance, against the version of science (i.e., dialectical materialism) developed by Karl Marx

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<sup>7</sup>Of course, similar nuance might qualify the claimed time of origin for the novel: earlier extended literary narratives that focus, with verisimilitude, on individualistic stories do exist—Asian (e.g., the 11th-century 'Tale of Genji') and medieval European (e.g., the 13th-century 'Roman de la Rose'), even classical (e.g., in the 2nd-century, Apuleius's 'The Golden Ass'). And, of course, interest in empirical science, including human thought and behavior, has roots just as deep (see, e.g., Rubenstein, 2003). Again, my concern here is contemporary nuance, not a millennial appreciation of human intellect.

(1867) in *Das Kapital*. Qualitative social science research, a comparative late-comer, illustrates this contemporary turning point rather well (i.e., history repeating itself). Its contemporary empirical carefulness emerging strongly in the second half of the 20th century, one might argue, rests on the historical precedent of the improved care of data first exhibited by quantitative social science research in the first half of the 20th century.

Now, I'm worrying here about the ways we do *empirical research of late*, rather than human curiosity as a whole, which is bound to survive together with our stupidities, if not exactly to survive them. By now, overall, it seems in empirical education research that already the baby (critique) has been displaced by the bath water (empiricism). The baby can't get the bath outside the tub. The challenge, always difficult, goes beyond appreciating critique to actually joining critique with a respectful treatment of empirical data.

Reading rural novels, then, gives one a much broader and deeper experience of rural ways of living and being than one can gather even through real-time experience as a rural person. Life is anyhow too short to provide all the everyday experience from which the sweep of rural education research might benefit. With good rural novels one can vicariously encounter not only more lives than one can in vivo, but encounter them far more deeply, more intimately, and usually with more insight. Reading rural novels could give researchers their best chance to engage the expressed interests of rural people and not merely those of the field of education, a particular professional dogma, or the otherwise uninformed trajectory of one's own career.

#### How to Read Novels to Inform Rural Education Critique

Reading a novel should ideally set up a buzz in readers' heads. This buzz is a sensibility to carry with one especially when not actively reading, but reflecting on the reading done and the ongoing project of reading. The buzzing resembles a complex music, in this case composed not only of the plot being recounted (though certainly that) but of, yes, ontological and epistemological matters of key importance to critique.

In fact, the buzzing itself is a kind of ongoing, though disorganized, critique in readers' minds about the qualities of the characters acting in a novel, the nature of the society in which they struggle, and the dynamics of such struggle at the level of everyday difficulties. These issues are partly social, political, economic, and institutional matters. And such features are among the things for education researchers to pick out amid the buzzing. The issues encountered should

<sup>8</sup>All readers of novels of my acquaintance report this phenomenon. The story lives with us as we take days or weeks to read it. Novels change lives in this way, perhaps haphazardly as do epiphanies in classrooms, for those lucky enough to enjoy them.

actually be familiar at some level, even for those not raised rurally.

What will differ from novel to novel, however, is the context of everyday experience in which these matters unfold as part of the development of the story. Such matters concern education precisely because, in its most legitimate sense, *education* represents what individuals learn by living (as they encounter social, economic, and institutional complexities). A principal subgenre of novel, in fact, is the "novel of education" or *Bildungsroman*. Education conceived in this way—the accumulating sum of encounters with life's complexities—is best when thoughtfulness intervenes, and as a general rule, more thoughtfulness is better (Bruner, 1996). Some characters in fiction are thoughtful, of course, and some are not, and this contrast is instructive to the observant researcher: Who is making decisions with educational intent or implications, why, with what effect, and for whom? Such questions, one should observe, resemble those often posed in empirical studies critically conceived.

The freight of dogma in education is a sharp burden in rural education research, and novels offer a critical approach to the dogma, grounded in every day life—even if not an actual everyday life. In the *Culture of Education* (1996), Jerome Bruner argues that the narrative impulse, as in novels, is a hallmark of good research. All stories, like all research studies, he says, begin with a problem, an issue, an offense of some sort.

There are compelling reasons, in short, to acquire a taste for reading novels if one wants to do rural education research. But what sort of themes relevant to everyday life and to education research ought one to look out for in rural novels? Let me suggest a string of them: place, family, love, identity, right and wrong, transition to adulthood, livelihoods, poverty, and out-migration. In good rural novels, all of these are interpreted, often within a single story. Place, in particular, is a key concept in rural education and its research enterprise, a concept that is particularly opaque to non-rural people. Non-rural people often don't imagine themselves to live any *place*. Raymond Williams, the great Welsh literary critic, a rare one who prized ordinary rural life, insisted that the great world cities were placeless (Williams, 1973). The suburbs are worse.

In its particular manifestation as *the land*, place exerts a formative influence in many excellent rural novels, and does so in ways largely inaccessible to novels about cities

<sup>9</sup>"Coming of age" stories are familiar in school curricula. Education, though, is not limited in novels to the young. Indeed, the evolving formation (*Bildung*) of its characters is a major theme in many novels.

<sup>10</sup>One can argue that certain city neighborhoods do cultivate residents' association, but a land ethic is not part of this version of "place." There's no *there* there (Stein, 1937).

and suburbs. In Wendell Berry's (1967) *A Place on Earth*, for instance, generations form one another by interacting with the land—using it, abusing it, and learning it—and in the process make themselves and their community. The shiftlessness of the late 19th and 20th century suburban project, by comparison, obliterates place (e.g., Kunstler, 1993; Orr, 1995), rendering it as real estate; even durable city neighbors interact with land only as real estate. Place, also not surprisingly, is poorly dealt with in education research (see Theobald & Manus, 1992, for an unusually thoughtful discussion of the concept of place in literature, sociology, and education). That is why we have our work cut out for us, and why rural novels are valuable both substantively and methodologically.

Readers who have gotten this far in the essay will probably appreciate a starter list. In my own life, novels are a very personal experience, and I can hardly commend novels I have not read. The list of novels appearing in Appendix A has only that authority. Indeed, a systematic study of novels would be counter to the exploratory purpose of reading such works to this hopeful end, and the point is not to reify or essentialize them, but to make them live, breathe, and expand. Their value lies in the experience of reading and not in any substitute or synthesis or synopsis of the experience. The real warrant here is the novel's rather steadfast, and *unfolding*, project of verisimilitude—and its length and complexity. There's a lot of *data* in novels—and considerable embedded critique, as well, and, on occasion, (as in Tolstoy) the critique is explicit, very nearly sociological. Reading relevant novels needs to be a goad to the critical imagination and eventually to the applicable critique itself. So, there is much in novels that might inform critique. But how does one use that information? And more troubling still, just how, after all, does one do critique, which is an approach to questions, analysis, and interpretation so doggedly ignored in education research?

#### Writing Critique

The act of *writing* distinguishes critique from the ordinary search for a suitable theory to guide research. Unfortunately, in far too much “normal” systematic inquiry (Kuhn, 1962), the tendency is to rely on *theorists* to provide the tailor-made fruits of critique, and this is especially the norm in education research. My objection does not mean that the appropriation or extension of an existing theory is a misstep, but rather suggests that this sort of decision itself is contingent on prior critique of one's own. One might argue that researchers need more often to do their own dirty work, in this regard. “Normal science” is not inherently dogmatic,

<sup>11</sup>Is critical theory that dogma? No, on one hand, its challenge might perhaps be want of sufficient empirical effort, but on the other hand its suspicion of empiricism often seems justified.

but much of the dogma prevailing in education evades both critique and the more limited rigors of normal science (see, e.g., the reports of the What Works Clearinghouse, which continues, so refreshingly or perhaps so ironically, to find not much that works and that what does work does not work all that much).

The lack of prior critique helps explain why theoretical grounding continues to be such a problem in education research, not only in doctoral work but in the work of established researchers. Again, lacking critique, studies are extremely vulnerable to the influence of dogma.

Reading novels can help, but reading is not, after all, writing. And that is how one does critique: One writes it. One *writes* critique less on the basis of existing empirical or theoretical literature within a field than on a more general skepticism of ideas. Richard Feynman, certainly pre-eminent among natural scientists, has observed, for example, that “science is the belief in the ignorance of experts” (1999, p. 187). Feynman, always the heterodox, displays the real spirit of critique here. One must doubt the theories and the conclusions of experts, and writing one's own critique is the way to begin. What's being argued here is not the sweeping critique of a Christopher Lasch (liberal) or Jacques Barzun (conservative) or Michael Apple (radical), but a more narrowly focused critique of the essential concepts of a field or of a line of research. Nor am I arguing to enthrone critique as a dogma, though as the AERA standards demonstrate, we are remote from that danger.

This work can be accomplished in a very brief essay of five to ten pages, but is an essential precondition, in my view, of the formulation of any research project. The focus is on the ideas that a relevant subset of theorists use or that is implicitly in play in everyday life. And the purpose of the critique is just as given by Wikipedia: to test the limits of those ideas in a bit of original systematic inquiry. In order to practice this sort of writing, one must have a view of how the ideas fit together (or misfit), what they mean (or don't), and what the implications of these matters might be in a given circumstance of interest (e.g., the role of place in schooling; academic and vocational purposes of schooling; district consolidation; proposals to eliminate local school boards; mathematics instruction; and so forth).

In particular, with a view to conducting empirical research, the purpose of critique is to show weaknesses—blindspots, missing considerations, premature conclusions, oversights, and complete silences—on which empirical study can shed useful light. Critique of this sort is the original theorizing that a decent study requires. After writing such critique, one may or may not adopt some already-existing theoretical framework—but one cannot make an informed decision of that sort without first writing original conceptual work. Such work isn't necessarily intended for publication,

but some portion of it will certainly find its way into an article manuscript once the study is complete.

#### How Does One Learn to Write Critique?

Reading rural novels is argued here as necessary, but it obviously cannot be sufficient for doing critique, since, as just noted, critique is writing, not reading. On this view, moreover, critique is *not* a thought process, but an act of literate creation. So the question here is an extremely useful one: How does one learn to write (in a particular way)?

Indeed, writers often wonder how people learn to write, and how they themselves learned. Learning to write, in fact, is not the same as learning to conduct research. Indeed, with the writing of critique being such an unfamiliar practice, one might say that researchers generally have not learned how to write what they most need to write. For years, I've in fact been struck by the expression one hears so frequently: "writing *up* a study." The amusing implication seems to exist here that a study dwells happily in some ideal realm as a true *platonian form*, and the "writing up" is a troublesome and inevitably imperfect translation. One gets the impression that what such researchers object to is the sad imprecision of language, which renders their written work so much less perfect than its original ineffable form.

By contrast, the view in this essay is that at the very outset, via critique, it is conceptually important *to write a study down*. It's an act of creation. It's why Einstein (in a 1929 Saturday Post interview) so famously asserted that "imagination is more important than knowledge" (Viereck, 1929, p. 17). Einstein apparently *had* read Dickens and maybe even Rilke. In general, then, one learns to write by writing the sort of writing required, and improvement in writing is incremental, but necessarily successive: one must keep at it. In this way, writers teach themselves (and one another) to write, often by mere dint of regular practice and much, much less through formal instruction. By far the best teachers of such writing are the great critics, some of whom are named in this essay (e.g., Adams, Arendt, Bacon, Barzun, Bruner, Feynman, Lasch, Theobald, and Tolstoy). There are so many excellent others down the centuries—far more than excellent rural novelists—that sources additional to mere ignorance of such authors must, alas, be named.

First is lack of will to write. Most humans aren't willing to commit themselves via writing—in a palpable, publicly accessible and potentially embarrassing form. And researchers are only human. This is why they prefer writing up to writing. Sadly, no writing means no critique and little thought (see Mitchell, 1973, for an extended argument that thought is language and the best thought writing).

Second, the origin of this distaste is perhaps the air of an anti-intellectual culture, but it is also learned in school. The reason here is simple: we can't teach writing in school because writers don't staff classrooms in anything close to

adequate numbers—and they never will. Most teachers are not even active readers—a fault of their education and work conditions and not a character flaw (Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis, 1995; VanLeirsburg & John, 1994). We're in a terrible fix, and reading seems by far the best way out.

Third, critique is a nasty negative project—the imaginative probing of the limitations of concepts and ideas. Writing critique is the exercise of a kind of arrogance, as Feynman suggests. I have occasionally maintained that we need another sort of score on applicants to doctoral programs, the score on a well validated instrument that measures intellectual arrogance. The proposition is often greeted with amusement...if not outright concern for my sanity.

Fourth, critique is bad education research policy, so far as The State is concerned. Here in America we like to "accentuate the positive." Following Henry Adams, we might hypothesize that education research is intended to be the handmaiden of what The State desires for its schools. This hypothesis finds some support in the actions of Congress and the U.S. Department of Education over the past decade to foster what the makers of policy call "education science." In a recent critique D.C. Phillips has shown the extent of these distortions (2006). In brief, Phillips details how varied are the purposes and methods of *natural science*—varied, not surprisingly, far beyond the knowledge of politicians and bureaucrats. Such are the conditions that disable critique—ignorance, miseducation, cultural distortion, and bad policy.

#### Coda: Example and Admonition

If one is dreadfully unsure about how to proceed to write critique, one ought to find a reader, a mentor, a critical friend who can react to drafts of such writing. This step is not so difficult to accomplish—if one has become convinced that critique is as important as claimed (few readers, one suspects, will be convinced). It also needs to be pointed out that excellent models of critique abound—outside empirically based studies, as previously suggested. One can read these authors—in sociology, political science, philosophy, history, feminist studies, and environmental science, for instance—for their methods as well as for their substance.

More may be needed here, however, to convince the skeptical of the merits of critique. For a good example of critique in practice, or at least ample evidence of the fruits of original critique see Beverly Burnell's study of the aspirations of rural youth (2003). Within rural aspirations research, the prevailing dogma is clearly that rural youth have lower aspirations (the experts have indeed found evidence) and that rural youth therefore need to be encouraged to embrace higher aspirations (this is the educationist's dogma: the more schooling, the better). Many studies have appeared in

peer-reviewed journals reporting the positive and negative influences on the aspirations of rural youth, cleaving to the truisms of the dogma. In the process, of course, some of these studies help to propagate a deficiency outlook on rural life and commitments.

Burnell had the intellectual fortitude to doubt the dogma, and her account of how she came to question it is so careful and measured that it might go unnoticed by the casual reader. The key objective insight, which I predict was arrived at through a more extended critique, occurs at the end of the article's introductory section:

Sociologists have employed status attainment models [citations] and structural models [citations] to focus on aspirations as indicators of potential for status, particularly status higher than one's parents (upward mobility). In these models, an occupation hierarchy based on prestige, determined by a combination of educational attainment and income, is the standard by which judgments about an individual's aspirations are made. (Burnell, 2003, p. 104)

So far, so good. This is a careful and objective summary of a salient set of concepts in the literature. The assessment is entirely unobjectionable. It seems almost self-evident, but it's not, and many scholars working in the field blithely accept the status attainment version of aspirations—without critique of any sort.

Note however, that Burnell adds a frame to the report of the literature. She writes, this “is the standard by which judgments are made.” The frame enables a critical view of such standards. The statement foreshadows the subsequent critical judgment:

Because the status in these models is based on educational and economic attainment, occupations that are highly rewarding socially and economically but do not

require high levels of education are not accorded high status and subsequently are not perceived by many as worthy goals [citations] (Burnell, 2003, pp. 104-105).

The assessment—a quite objective one—advances critique by sidestepping dogma, and it takes the inquiry to the edge of a research question, and actually, to the edge of many relevant, pointed rural questions. Our field could certainly use about a dozen studies based on this critique, and thousands on critique like it.

In education research, the dogmas of improvement more often blind than enlighten us, and they seldom improve anyone else (see, e.g., Scott, 1998). Critique offers a way for rural education to define its own research questions and to interpret the findings appropriately. Some in the field, though, are working hard to distance education research even further from critique. They must be frightened of science. That's good to realize. We can do something with that.

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<sup>12</sup>Burnell doesn't put the question her study addresses this way, but it's something like this: “Given the prejudices of status attainment models of aspirations, what are rural kids who are prepared to do well in college doing and thinking when they make other plans for life after high school?”

<sup>13</sup>A helpful reviewer cited other quite recent work that has yielded findings consistent with the example, some of which I had read. What I've liked in the example, however, is its ordinariness—the thinking is simple and the writing very clear so that anyone attending to it may easily understand. The critique also, perhaps surprisingly, does not rely on the authority of the various well-known critics of the status-attainment model, but on what is presented as the author's own logic. Burnell, unfortunately, has not published any additional work contributory to this line of evidence, though others have (cf. Corbett, 2007).

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## Appendix A

## Novels Commended from Personal Experience

This short and necessarily incomplete list admittedly tends to reflect my agrarian outlook, the product of an adult life spent farming. Nonetheless, several works listed here deserve, in my estimation, particular note. To my mind, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is the greatest rural novel of all time. Tolstoy's work inspired the urban lawyer Mohandas Gandhi to remake himself as a farmer and to embrace rural living as a form of resistance. The characters in Llewellyn (1940) and Stegner (1971) are, of course, involved with mining, but on rural ground. Achebe's tale of African village life over-run by functionaries of colonialism embeds issues related to identity, community, and hegemony. Morrison's *Beloved* reminds white readers, at least, that rural life is not at all an idyll, but that it has sponsored outright genocide (American Indians), enslavement (Africans), racism (all people with dark skins), and oppression (the poor). Overall, though, the big demons of life on earth appear in each of the listed novels. The discerning reader could (and should) add many, many more relevant works to this list.

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