

Motives, Methods or Quality?: Making Sense of Howley, Howley and Yahn

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In their recent article, “Motives for Dissertation Research at the Intersection between Rural Education and Curriculum and Instruction,” Howley, Howley, and Yahn (2014) describe a rigorous and time-consuming study examining rural education dissertations written over the last 25 years. Their data analysis led to four codes used to categorize motives of 188 dissertations. In addition to reading 188 dissertations, they read several hundred more abstracts to determine a thorough sample, meeting virtually and in person to examine the “ways in which dissertations related to curriculum and instruction have engaged rurality” as a means of discerning the motives of these dissertation theses (p. 1). They argue it’s important for us (current rural education researchers) to know what emerging scholars are up to.

Howley, Howley, and Yahn are careful from the outset to discerningly articulate their intent: to examine studies – or *texts* – not authors. They explain that they are not exploring the “psychological constructs of authors” but, rather, questioning the motives of the texts. In doing so, they rely on Kenneth Burke’s *A Grammar of Motives* (1945). Burke wrote that art was a form of communication and that literature does something for the writer and the reader—that texts are symbolic acts (Hochmuth, 1941). In that respect, applying it as a theoretical lens to understand the effect or outcomes of the dissertation itself is perhaps as good a fit as other, more familiar theoretical frames in symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) or similar traditions in literacy research, such as text, discourse, or narrative analyses. In fact, I quite like that Burke allows for us to hold up a text and see how it’s behaving in the world without putting the author under a microscope.

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From their exhaustive study, Howley, Howley, and Yahn discuss a coding system of four classifications explaining motives of curriculum and instruction dissertations in rural education. These four codes include: rural knowledge, rural convenience, rural justice, and rural caring. Each code explains the motive of the text: rural knowledge as seeking professional knowledge; rural convenience as existing rurally only by incidence (i.e., “set” circumstances that happen to be rural); rural justice addressing an ethical issue; and rural caring appreciating the “substantive rural.” The authors set out to investigate “motives and methods” (p. 2), yet we come away knowing fairly little about methods. For instance, they say it is the interplay of agency and purpose that enables the analysis of motive, but there is little discussion of *their* method or methodologies used to examine this “tension” between purpose and method. The reader is thus left with questions about the relationship between motives and methods, wondering for example how quantitative versus qualitative paradigms influence motive, if at all. This could be an important omission since they rely on the Burkean approach for understanding motive relative to method. What we *do* get, however, is a commentary (often parenthetical and footnoted) about the poor quality of the dissertations in their sample. In this response, I share a few thoughts for consideration, namely about the process of a dissertation and its role in a doctoral program, the take-home message about quality, and how we might promote greater inclusivity within the broader arena of rural education research.

The Point of a Dissertation

As a rural education researcher who works in Appalachia, who not too long ago wrote a dissertation at the intersection between rural education and curriculum and instruction, who directs dissertation studies, and who is a rural native, I read Howley, Howley and Yahn’s study with particular interest (which is to say I’m probably not very objective). I readily confess as a rural education

researcher for having what Coladarci (2007) called “rather strong personal convictions.” Probably not unlike Howley, Howley, and Yahn, I come to my research in rural education as an advocate for rural people, communities, places, and spaces, and work hard as a scholar and researcher to balance that advocacy with both an ethical and critical stance—again heeding Coladarci’s caution and advice. This means that like many of my colleagues in this field my work calls attention to the strengths, needs, challenges, benefits, the “rural substantive,” and more in rural education. As the authors point out from their own work, many of us have to defend or explain the “why” of the work we do. Our doctoral students, however, have likely not had these experiences. True, they might have strong convictions, but the primary focus of their “rural education research” may, in fact, be to better understand special education transition services in rural communities, or math instruction for rural learners, or gifted education curricula in rural schools, meaning “rural” may be one of several ways for contextualizing their work, and it is unclear how or if the authors account for these conflated motives and methodologies and contexts. This is perhaps what they mean by rural *convenience*, yet the fact that a study may not be intentionally rural does not necessarily preclude it from being a rural study. Additionally, these students may not have *intended* for their work to be considered rural education research (in the way, for example, researchers submitting to this journal might intend for their work to be).

Doctoral candidates writing their dissertations are many things—emerging scholars and researchers, yes—but also *students*. The dissertation is more than a rite of passage; it is both the process and product of their learning. Dissertations allow faculties to judge students’ research skills, development of those skills, and contribution to the knowledge of a given field (Isaac, Quinlan, & Walker, 1992). Recently, in a doctoral seminar of about 20 curriculum and instruction students, I asked students to illustrate or describe an analogy for their doctoral experience. We had several mountains to climb, a few ominous natural disasters and terrifying exploits, but my favorite was a student comparing the writing of a dissertation to giving birth. It’s a good analogy here because the process of writing a dissertation is often a hard and emotionally daunting experience. While examining the motives of these hard fought battles is certainly a worthwhile endeavor, it is in some ways an unfair one if we detach those texts from the real people who spent three, four, six, or eight years in the process of becoming a scholar and understanding what it means to write a dissertation. But Howley, Howley, and Yahn don’t, in fact, detach the authors from their works because later they call into question not only the motives of those studies but the quality, too.

With regard to the quality and role of the *actors*, that is (according to the authors) the dissertation committees or directors, Howley, Howley, and Yahn suggest that their data set represented “too many poorly prepared students receiving far, far too little support from advisors” (p. 11). Howley, Howley, and Yahn conclude their piece with recommendations for students and dissertation directors to include a rural scholar on committees engaging rural issues. This is a good idea if such a faculty member is available; however, I would caution against this as a blanket recommendation if it serves to quash a doctoral student’s intent to engage in rural research. Further, it seems overly speculative for the authors to draw a conclusion about students’ dissertation advisors when from the outset they aimed at looking only at the motive of the study – not the authors, stating “an exclusive focus on narrative excludes the actors (e.g., committees, students, and dissertation directors), events (e.g., the process of dissertation writing), and scenes (e.g., the universities where dissertations are produced)” (p. 3). Though they attempt to focus only on agency and purpose, they perhaps confront what Burke argued for in his dramatisic pentad, which is that to make any complete statement about motive one must address all five questions (Burke, 1945; Overington, 1977): Who are the actors? What are the methods? What is occurring? What is the scene? And what is the reason for the situation? (Howley, Howley, & Yahn, 2014, p. 3).

Less Division, More Inclusion

There seems to be quite a bit of needless dichotomies and divisiveness in the field of rural education and even perhaps directly among rural scholars. I have observed this now at several national and international meetings in rural education, in journals, and in other texts where we are told what’s rural or not rural, who does or doesn’t have permission to do rural education research, and how they can or can’t conduct that research. Howley, Howley, and Yahn tell us that rural is a set of meanings but that these are difficult to appreciate and that a lack of appreciation often results in rural life being described as deficient; however, that very statement is a subjectivity unto itself, and researchers not sharing that same stance can still contribute to understandings about rural education. Studies that describe rural contexts in what might be considered negative or unflattering ways (e.g., McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2014) still contribute to nuanced understandings of rural life and rural education.

While I appreciate the authors’ care in not calling out authors of “bad studies,” we are not so fooled to think these dissertations wrote themselves. Unlike a work of fiction, perhaps in the Burkean sense, we as researchers do not

necessarily “lose” ourselves in the scholarship. We *are* our work. Given their prolific, high-impact careers, I would like to think the Howleys appreciate that we in many ways come to embody our work. The *What do you do?* question for academics means *What do you study?* or, *What is your research?* Our livelihood and tenure are based on such questions.

I know firsthand the argument the authors make as a rationale for their study. Many of us who have or are trying to build a career in rural education research often have to explain the uniqueness of rural and defend our work – if not defend rural altogether! However, with so much literature and rhetoric in the last several decades about responsive and inclusive pedagogies, and differentiation (just to mention a few), I think it’s clear that as an education field we have long considered contexts of culture, race, ethnicity, gender, society, politics, rurality, urbanicity, and so forth. Though common standards and high-stakes assessment might suggest otherwise, context matters. Place matters. *Rural* matters. (Hence my motivation for this response!) A study on motives is helpful and informative, and I respect and appreciate the authors’ contribution. However, I fear that their harsh criticism about quality, even if warranted, serves to divide and tear down rather than build up the field and young scholars. I worry that a study investigating motive but with a subtext about quality might unnecessarily alienate or marginalize the work of would be rural education researchers. We want to draw people in—scholars who agree, disagree—and if we call the entrance to the field an appalling mess then it undermines the important work we all do.

The authors found their sample to be overrepresented by too many bad studies, called the studies “wretched,” saying that a “quarter or a third were poor or worse” with many more described as “just mediocre” (p. 9). This is a powerful take-away. While I appreciate the thorough discussion of motives, I find myself perseverating here on quality. If the subject of quality served as an unintended finding, then perhaps a future study might investigate this issue, employing the same rigorous method of research as the authors used in assessing and categorizing motive. Coladarci’s (2007) swan song has served as a guide for *JRRE* and the field of rural education research, and in it he discusses criteria for measuring the yield. Does a given study: (a) describe the rural context of research; (b) make the rural argument (i.e., rural phenomenon or phenomenon incidentally in a rural setting), and; (c) frame the research question (i.e., draws on other disciplines, synthesize extant data, and does not adduce data to support personal convictions)? These criteria can be applied to dissertations; however, it’s important to remember that doctoral students have many constraints influencing their decisions and writing, sometimes with variables beyond their control

(e.g., adequate time and financial support for their research). If assessing quality, I might argue that we also consider the dissertation requirements for a given institution to better understand how a dissertation is contextualized for any given student. Recognizing that the dissertation is both process and product, perhaps another measure of quality could be the relationship between dissertations and eventual publication of that work in peer-reviewed journals. The dissertation may be the sexiest part of the doctoral degree, but it is typically preceded by years of sweat in courses and comprehensive exams and accompanied by an oral defense. I think it’s flawed to assume that on the other end of a “bad study” (p. 10), or rather a bad *dissertation*, is an overly credentialed or “ill-prepared” researcher who will be unwise in rural research.

Burke (1945) introduces his text by asking, “What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it” (p. xv)? I think we have to use great care when answering this question, especially if the answers “violate the norms of collegiality” (Howley, Howley, & Yahn, 2014, p. 10). I agree with the subtext that quality is important. Of course it is. But so is the integrity of the process of learning. I’m not giving the dissertation a pass as a genre of scholarship. It *is* a piece of scholarship, and should hold up under any scrutiny. However, I’d like to think we all get better with the work we do once we gain experience. And in a study that examines motives and method, we come away knowing little of either – except that the vast majority of rural education dissertations in curriculum and instruction seek knowledge – which sounds about right. We’re left however with a commentary on the quality of those dissertations, leaving me with the question: What is this text up to?

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