

Three Rejoinders in Search of an Author

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The three rejoinders that follow engage ideas in Amy Azano's critique (q.v.) of our study of dissertations with a dual focus on rural education and curriculum and instruction (C&I). The journal editors invited a rejoinder to the critique, and we have provided three of them, offered as anonymous, but playfully, for reasons we explain next.

Background

The title of this set of responses alludes to Luigi Pirandello's great twentieth century play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.¹ Pirandello's play (1921) is among the first works of fiction or philosophy to explore, in a contemporary frame of reference, the nature of authorship. What is it? Who does it? Who gets to do it? The play has much to say about the framing of events, real and sham,

¹The play is witty and funny like most in its genre. For a summary of this famous work, see the Wikipedia entry for the play. American schooling is perhaps itself more and more "absurdist"—purposively less equitable, more careerist, and more shallow (see, e.g., Deresiewicz, 2014). For another work in American education that grasped such relevance, see McDermott and Aron's (1978) "Pirandello in the Classroom." We were pleased to see that Hervé Varenne assigns it to be read in his course on the ethnography of education (see http://varenne.tc.columbia.edu/class/tf5016/tf5016_syl.html).

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and various sorts of motives for representing them. Are representations accurate? Are those making (authorizing) them sincere? Considering the issues Amy raises about authors and authority, the allusion to Pirandello seems apt.

Her critique asked us to entertain questions about authority and authorship among other related matters, and we respond, each of us separately according to the reflections evoked in us by the critique. To be clear: the critique has evoked (rather than provoked) these separately directed rejoinders. This is an issue otherwise understood as "method." We want, in part, to avoid the point-by-point parrying and defensiveness so often seen in these sorts of interchanges.

If the rejoinders do not seem to exhibit unity, or to propose a single voice, or to deploy similar expository styles, well, that is in the nature of separate voices. Of course, the text in question (Howley et al., 2014) appears as if it *did* come from a single author, despite draping the mantle of "author" over *three* people. It's worse than that, though. The study originated as the idea of a group of doctoral students, another faculty member, and an undergraduate student (some of them acknowledged in an article footnote) who met over several semesters in a rural reading group with Craig. All but Jacqueline moved onto other things before the analysis was complete and long before the writing began. But it was *a group idea* to examine the intersection of rural with C&I and to draw on the insights of Burke (1945/1968), even if the entire group could not subsequently be represented as authors. Thus, in some senses the authorship of the text remains obscure, even to us, but this obscurity applies to all multiply authored works, and, in another sense (Pirandello's, actually) even to single-authored works: one works in a tradition, under the sway of other voices (i.e., sources, inspirations, ideas).

The unidentified voices we present below are in search of authorship: now, and in the future. And they were searching, then, too.

Back *then*, the study was a group project with twists, turns, reversals, retrievals, and multiple and disparate contributions. Later on, it was done. Then what? What does it do after it is done? The field of education research has a subspecialty that takes this later-on doing perhaps too seriously: dissemination research. The idea, in part, is that one should know not just what one's work is up to, but how, exactly, it *should* be used to *perfection* (Coffield & Edward, 2009). We find such expectations truly absurd because, with such political theorists as Arendt (1959), we understand that action produces unpredictable future action, without end. Foucault put it well: "People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does" (cited in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, p. 187). We *can't* know. So despite the playfulness, our evoked rejoinders take up issues that all four of us, critic and would-be authors, regard as momentous.

One might recap the phases of the discussion at this point: our analysis categorized the dissertations in terms primarily of their motives as "reflected in the language evident in dissertation texts" (Howley, Howley, & Yahn, 2014, p. 1). Our reading and discussion showed us how few dissertations dealing with rural schools and rural people exercised defensible caution and skepticism, and how many began and persisted with unexamined assumptions about rural inferiority. In her critique, Amy concluded that the effect of the article and its discourse might be to turn away some voices, with harsh judgment—of both motive and quality—who might be recruited to do additional rural education research. The prospect is troublesome and troubled her, quite logically, in terms of her own experience of working with doctoral students. The tension between invitation and judgment is indeed, we think, active in the article. The two senior authors (Aimee and Craig) have talked about just these questions for many years but not written about them much (see Howley & Howley, 2014, for a recent exception); and the junior author (Jacqueline) arrived at Ohio University already thinking about these very questions—a circumstance that helps explain the collaboration.

Rejoinder 1

I appreciate the gestures of empathy from a reader toward those working on dissertations. Moreover, I agree that it is unfair to suggest emerging scholars should arrive in the field as real life Benjamin Buttons (Fitzgerald, 1922), all of them mysteriously positioned with the knowledge acquired throughout a lifetime of scholarship. With that

said, as young scholars commit to the trek before them, they should expect to be asked just what they are up to. The question is always fair because educational research, regardless of the stage in one's career, is representative not just of academic aims, but also of the people and places one sets out to study. Study directors and committees bear this responsibility, too. Such prodding is essential to the health of the field. Research demands at least a modicum of skepticism, and one therefore owes both one's scholarly comrades and one's research participants an explanation of exactly what one is doing. What then were we up to (and not just the text)?

I coordinate a teacher education program enrolling teacher candidates all of whom are rural. Nearly all will—after completing the program—return to small rural schools nearby. What have such cohorts typically learned from the research they are exposed to? Almost nothing rural. Instead they have learned that rural teachers need to adopt a changeable best practice—one that stays "best," in part, by alleging rural inferiority (see Howley, Howley, & Huber, 2005, for an illustrative analysis relating to mathematics education). In line, then, with documented realities, I saw the potential for damage in many of the dissertations we examined for our study. So it seems important to me that C&I dissertations at least *begin* more skeptically than by assuming, alleging, and sometimes characterizing, the overall inferiority of the places and people of purported interest. For instance, many studies begin with a litany of rural woes, sometimes substantiated with data, but often simply assumed or alleged—higher poverty rates, lower educational attainment, lower aspirations, more unqualified teachers, fewer curriculum options, remoteness from urban amenities, and so forth. In other words, *all* the familiarly supposed disadvantages combined, too often in such studies, with *none* of the arguable advantages (safety, family, neighborliness, community, and so forth). Metropolitan realities are good; rural realities are not so good. The solution is for rural schools and communities to become more like metropolitan ones (see, Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999, for the history).

The potential for damage is more significant than it once was because of the noticeable increase in dissertation studies on C&I in rural schools, but the tendency to damage seems avoidable. I was perhaps the member of the team most concerned with how bad (insufficiently skeptical) research might influence curriculum and instruction in rural schools for ill and not for the intended good. No more than we can separate the scholar from the research (one of Amy's concerns) can we separate the research from the people that it represents. Batteau (1990) noted as much about the field of Appalachian studies: "The making of Appalachia was a literary and political invention, rather than a geographic discovery" (p.1), referencing the ways in which much of

the writing (both fiction and nonfiction) about Appalachia in the 19th and 20th centuries, often contributed by elite voices, allowed a nation to designate a portion of its own people as deviant others, gone astray from societal norms. No scholar has the right to ignore the fact that his or her research provides the larger academic community with a snapshot of the population he or she studies.

Perhaps what most alarmed me was how few of the dissertations left much room, in some cases no room at all, for doubt about their assertions of rural deficiency or inferiority. That their committee members, most importantly their chairpersons, also did not seem to introduce such doubt seemed evident in the texts. As a result, the dissertations contributed to positioning the rural education institutions (e.g., schools, colleges, families) that the studies examined as marginal: far removed from an acceptable norm.

Political theorist and anthropologist James Scott, critic of grand plans for improvement, started out (with admirable skepticism) by simply trying to learn something about rural people—in other words, by treating his participants and their ways of life as central, and interesting. He suggested that one has to spend time in the rural community asking questions, observing the local politics (both the obvious and not so obvious), and taking a look at the history. As he put it “If you are going to devote your life to studying people who grow rice, then you should at least, hopefully, grow one rice crop yourself” (Yahn, 2014, p. 11).

Rejoinder 2

I appreciate the opportunity to start a discussion with a reader who was piqued enough to write a response. In fact, opening up an opportunity for discussion is a gloss for what our text—this one just as others I write—is doing. Foucault observes (in the passage quoted in the introduction), though, that an author cannot really know what his or her text is doing or what his or her actions (narrative or otherwise) are doing. It’s a cause for worry, especially if one harbors suspicions such as those offered by my colleague in Rejoinder 1.

I begin this rejoinder, then, by disclosing what I do and do not *intend*. (What our narrative might be intending is better left to its critics.) First, I do not intend to hurt anyone’s feelings. But I do intend to judge—to identify motive based on one reading of the dissertations (aided by Burke) and to make judgments of quality based on a lifetime of work. Second, I do not intend to make definitive claims (even about so idiosyncratic an assortment of junior studies as careful searching and documenting of search strategies might produce) but instead to interpret—to make sense of my experience of what the studies appear to be doing in face of what I think the field might need them to be doing. Finally, I do not intend to keep voices silent but also not to conflate dissertation writing with having a voice.

All of us in this particular conversation—including the authors of the dissertations—have a voice. That’s not to say that everyone has a voice.² But professionals who make it to a doctoral program belong to an elite group—and, for good and often ill, members of elite groups *do* have a voice. Foucault worries that their voices are often too loud.

So do I; it’s why the article expresses concern that so many dissertations speak with a “professional” voice and comparatively few speak with a rural voice. But, the article argues and I repeat, it does our field no good for dissertations purporting to explore rural education either to fix the practice of rural education out of existence or to represent it poorly through a simulation (and in some cases even a mockery) of scholarship for the purpose of someone’s career—degree accrual, elite status, tenure.

As for authorship, I think it belongs to everyone. Even the oppressed and the imprisoned find ways to write and to publish. But authority to guide the authorship of others belongs to a much smaller group than “everyone.” The dissertation, after all, is partly or even mostly a learning experience. But once that learning experience sits in the past, the person who holds the degree is *authorized* to be the teacher of those who seek it—bad news if each generation in the series is less and less well prepared.

Most of all rural education needs rural voices, even if they are brought to light by members of an elite group (i.e., rural education scholars). To borrow again from Foucault, I see value in the disqualified (rural) voices, the stories from the (rural) margins, the local and regional knowledge:

I also believe that it is through the re-emergence of these low-ranking knowledges, these unqualified, even directly disqualified knowledges . . . though it is far from being a general commonsense knowledge, but is on the contrary a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it—that it is through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work. (Foucault, 1980, p. 82)

And, with Foucault, I worry that those with the ability to help disqualified voices gain a hearing may co-opt those voices in order to subjugate them. Much of Foucault’s work, in fact, details the mechanisms for exactly this sort of subjugation. The motive of attempting to acquire “rural knowledge,” then, is particularly suspect. Whereas the motive of “rural convenience” co-opts simply for personal gain, the motive of “rural knowledge” *often* co-opts

²That is, marginalization, disenfranchisement, oppression, imprisonment, and enslavement *diminish* “voice,” and often to the point of silence.

primarily to subjugate. This observation does not imply that every “rural knowledge” dissertation in our sample drew on a deficiency perspective. But most of them did—some baldly and others with greater circumspection.

Rejoinder 3

“What is this text up to?” It’s a fair question to be asked of any completed work, and it was also the one we put to so many completed works that seemed to be up to something we didn’t much like. In this case, though, an interlocutor has the right to interrogate not just the work, but, let us say, the authorship. I’m on board that ship, and this is my authorial confession (a genre I like, actually).

The study, like everything else, comes in a strange way out of the conditions of life and work over several decades. Indeed, it deals with work(s) I have done myself: helping students create dissertations. Focus, in such work as I do it, is on what students *think* (in writing) and hardly at all on how they feel (in their spirits or souls). When students arrive at the point of writing a dissertation (I conceive of the dissertation as a kind of writing), I try to remind myself (in particular) that they have earned the *opportunity* to create a good to excellent study. Will they use the opportunity *wisely*? The writing will tell. They might not succeed, and even more than that: *they have no particular right to succeed*. Notably, in my own practice I have been little concerned to “get students through” the “dissertation process.” The dissertation is not a hurdle, not another fence to jump over. It had better not be. The lesson is difficult to learn: both for those dissenting and those guiding the writing.

Moreover, the sort of work I do in guiding dissertations is the peculiar sort that I myself do in the way that I personally do it, and not in an abstract sort of way that anyone might use to help any student do a dissertation. Authority for the doing of this work rests mostly in that uniqueness. Who decides what is good? I do. I admit that I cannot be sure, in the directing of doctoral studies, of what what I do *does* (cf. Foucault, above). I’m pretty sure that my students create good to excellent works, but some students find they cannot work with me.

These confessions disclose matters that, in the study of dissertations, were closed to us: we could not know about the process, but we could surmise to a degree, at least in extreme cases. When making judgments about texts we were careful—not just in the writing, but as we read and met and talked about studies—to foil ad-hominem squalor. The texts, not the authors, were our concern: we know how difficult good writing is. We are sure, in fact, that student authors of bad to wretched³ works are much less at fault

³As Wayne Urban writes, “I don’t want to discount the notion of academic snobbery in characterizing education faculties as anti-

then others. That evident failing (*evident in the works*) is what rankles.

So we did find another sort of squalor: which was really not news to us—not at all, across now long careers. I knew well, in general, that many education dissertations were bad and some (too many) *wretched*. As a field we should no more invite everyone to the work of writing dissertations (including in rural education) than one asks everyone to love Prokofiev. There surely *is* a time for an invitation to love Prokofiev (I have often given it), but the time for the invitation is not at the rehearsal of the piano concerto! At that point, understanding and devotion to the work—and preferably love of the work involved—is a requirement. I expect it.

Did we already know what we would “find” beforehand? Is it a serious study? Of course I, and we, did not know: this is a body of nearly 200 works, which we hadn’t read. It’s quite true that I had read many works *like* them across the decades and would probably have rendered a very similar assessment, had I (a big if) directed similarly systematic attention to those other works. But those earlier experiences no doubt helped shape the work now in print. Experience is one of the obscurities of authorship.

I find, and so do the two other voices here, that we have a duty to create (and facilitate) scholarship that doesn’t set out to disparage rural places and people. *This text and the one already published are up to that purpose*. Many of the studies we examined actually begin with the familiar disparagement, and without a shred of scholarly doubt on view. Not a shred. It’s a fact far more than an interpretation. Too many of the dissertations described rural places as backward, without resources, without aspirations, and in dire need of outside help from people who know better: from experts of the sort the dissertations in play had hoped to *qualify* (cf. Howley et al., 2005). Indeed, in reviewing for this very journal over the years, I’ve seen exactly such manuscripts (in these cases, the editors have been as unreceptive as the reviewers). Such inadequate manuscripts, of course, ensue often from just the sort of dissertations we read—though, of course, not usually those of poorest quality.

It’s true too (and fairly observed by Amy) that some

intellectual, but I also want to suggest that the situation is one in which more than academic snobbery is operating. One place to look for evidence about colleges of education is in the dissertations their doctoral students have produced. I won’t cite titles here, but I would like to say that I’ve been on more than a few in my career that came close to being a joke. And I’ve seen plenty of others that appear, by title, to be an academic joke. I’ll let readers provide their own examples. The area of curriculum and instruction is particularly susceptible to questionable dissertations, but I would not exempt the foundations area, or any other sub-specialty in education from critical scrutiny” (2013, p. 23).

or many authors of the studies in our collection may not have set out to write anything that anyone might call rural dissertations except for the indexing, the titles, and the variable frequency with which the word appears in these texts—that they were, in other words, up to something quite different from what I would have preferred. Rural was just collateral damage in such studies, perhaps. The classification of texts, though, does not depend on good intentions; it takes the words used on face value. And we (including several students who participated in early phases of the project) vetted nearly 600 texts before choosing the arguably most rural. We debated the choices. So in this sense of the obvious, the texts really are what they are: they do engage rural. They can't help doing so, even if they do it clumsily or badly. This existential condition applies to our text, too, to the one Amy was responding to. The words are there; we can't take them back, actually.

As for the inclusion of voices and what our text is up to, I know that many students interested in writing rural dissertations often have trouble getting anyone to take their rural intentions seriously. They are told:

“Don't do that: no one cares.”

“It's bad for your career.”

“Study urban schools instead, the issues are really the same.”

“You don't have to be *that* selfless.”

“Why? There's no research base.”

One of the things I hope our study *does* do in the future is to help students with rural intentions access a *usefully wider view* of what their hoped-for work fits into, and then find a way to do it. I've often told my own kin to demand what they need of educational institutions. Mostly, I find, those institutions are (institutionally speaking) up to what they do best, even at the highest levels: repressing thought and ensuring conformity (Deresiewicz, 2014). Doctoral work has simply got to be very, very different.

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