

Section One:
Researching Language and Literacies

Edited by Patrick Alan Danaher

Section One Section Introduction

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It is hardly surprising that five of the book's 14 chapters – more than one third of them – are concerned with engaging with the strategic uncertainties of researching language and literacies. This proportion reflects the centrality of language in meaning-making in all societies, as well as the multiple ways – implicit as well as explicit, covert as much as overt – in which literacies empower some individuals and groups and disenfranchise others. As the authors represented in this section of the book ably demonstrate, researching language and literacies is a strategically uncertain enterprise – or a 'risky business', as several of the authors in this book term it – imbued with ethical and political responsibilities and imbricated with risks connected directly with people's life chances and lifeworlds.

In Chapter One, Robyn Rowan elaborates a discursive and ecological conceptual framework and deploys it to deconstruct understandings of 'students at educational risk' held by students, parents and teachers in an Australian regional primary school. Rowan demonstrates that these understandings are closely tied to the social practices – including the language – of schooling. Moreover, she argues that her responsibilities as researcher include 'rupturing risk' and using strategic uncertainties to create new openings for ongoing discussions of how and why schooling constructs students in particular ways.

Jenny McDougall uses Chapter Two to focus on the discourses attending 'visual literacy' as a way of investigating the knowledge of such literacy held by a group of primary school teachers in an Australian regional community. McDougall is concerned to enact her researcher's role in ways that do not exploit teachers' vulnerabilities and thereby reinforce their seemingly general suspicion of research and theory. At the same time, she identifies linguistic opportunities in her interviews with the teachers as potentially fruitful 'uncanny openings' and strategic uncertainties for facilitating mutual understanding.

In Chapter Three, R. E. (Bobby) Harreveld switches focus from primary school classrooms to adult literacy teachers working in regional, rural and remote areas of Central Queensland. In a thought-provoking variation on the book's title, Harreveld contends that converting uncertainties into risks, rather than the uncertainties themselves, is strategic. She demonstrates that, just as the literacy teachers with whom she researched routinely broker their compliance with a new adult literacy curriculum through their concerns for the realities of their students' lives, so too researchers of adult literacy must strategically broker the multiple contexts and influences framing the design and execution of their research projects.

Chapters Four and Five focus on the Language and Learning course in the nationally and internationally acclaimed Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) program at Central Queensland University. In Chapter Four, Sue McIntosh recounts how the acquisition of academic writing skills by STEPS students is a 'risky business' that highlights competing views of how and by whom knowledge is constructed. She uses an action research model to reflect both on the course's development and on her own growth as a researcher with her students, engaging with the spaces that the course has opened for her and for them.

Finally in this section, Jenny Simpson uses Chapter Five to explore how the 12 steps of the Hero's Journey provide an ethically and politically appropriate framework for Language and Learning students in the STEPS program to enact the roles of learner-researchers reflecting on their own lives as well as on contemporary Australia. Simpson shows how strategically engaging with the uncertainties in their lives equips students to transform their life chances and their outlooks on the world. This process is risky for both Simpson and her students, but the benefits of the students researching language and literacies in the challenging and supportive environment of STEPS are compelling.