Motives for Dissertation Research at the Intersection Between Rural Education and Curriculum and Instruction

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Dissertation literature focusing on issues of curriculum and instruction (C&I) in rural schools has substantially increased since 1987. We located 580 possibly rural C&I dissertations and subsequently identified 194 as probably rural; of these we were able to obtain digital copies of 188 full-length studies. Our purpose was to characterize the explicit motives evident in the discourse of these 188 works. Kenneth Burke's A Grammar of Motives *supplied the theoretical framework supporting our consensus coding of each dissertation as primarily reflecting one of four rural motives: (1) rural knowledge motive, (2) rural justice motive, (3) rural caring motive, and (4) rural convenience motive. The motive characterizing more than half of the dissertations was rural knowledge whereas the motive characterizing the fewest dissertations was rural caring. Our interpretation speculates about the tendency for C&I studies to focus on improvement, especially in face of the purported deficiency of rural people and places. Detailed analysis of 188 dissertations also gave us a basis to offer critique of dissertation research in the field of rural education with recommendations for dissertation students and the faculty who support dissertation work.*

In 1987 DeYoung reviewed the scope of the existing rural education research and called for an increase in both the quantity and quality of such research. Since that time more research has indeed appeared in venues such as the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* and *Rural Educator*. Dissertation studies are among those that rarely receive much notice, however. And yet, doctoral programs are the venue in which contemporary scholars prepare future scholars for such work.

As part of this effort to cultivate relevant intellectual capacity in rural education research, our purpose in this study is to examine the ways in which dissertations related to curriculum and instruction have engaged rurality. What, we ask, are the motives of these works?

One point about this examination must be stressed at the outset: this investigation examines *studies*—texts and not authors. When, throughout, we refer to "motives" we are not referencing any psychological construct relevant to persons, but features of texts. This usage may at first seem odd to educators, who are used to psychological applications, especially with respect to teaching and learning (curriculum and instruction). Instead of psychology for a framework, however, we turned to literary theory, specifically a small slice of the "grammar of motives" proposed long ago by Kenneth Burke (1945/1969). Again: we do not attempt to infer the hidden motives of authors as persons, but to display the motives (as conceived by Burke) that are reflected in the language evident in dissertation texts. We explain the Burkean inspiration in more detail in our discussions of our theoretical framework and research methods.

Why do we focus attention on curriculum and instruction? As life-long practitioners in rural education

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This study emerged from a seminar requested by several Ohio University doctoral students in mathematics education: Jeffrey Taylor, Derek Sturgill, and Mike Smith. Jacqueline joined the group in its second semester and remained with the study to read, code, and write. It was Jeff who proposed Burke as the theoretical framework.

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research, we have often been asked a vexing question by colleagues, particularly by teacher education faculty: "What's so special about rural? Isn't good teaching the same *everywhere*?" Many answers are possible, but over the years none has satisfied our interlocutors. In the field of curriculum and instruction, belief appears strong that best practice (for teaching and learning) is universally applicable and, in fact, especially needful in deficient contexts ("inner" cities and "isolated" rural communities). We are not so sure, even though we have worked within teacher education ourselves. But we are also unsure exactly what might qualify as "authentically rural" pedagogy. In our own minds and writing, we think it has something to do with what used to be called "the aims of education" (e.g., the title of Whitehead's famous 1929 work). An authentically rural education, then, would respond to purposes that concerned rural ways of living, instead of rural-specific ways of teaching lessons considered universally appropriate.

At the same time, however, rural education research itself has not seemed—to the senior authors, over their careers—to engage very well what rural curriculum and teaching practice *does* require. Rather, the most extensive rural engagement (evident, for instance, in our own work) is with systemic features: policy, administration, culture, and community. Place-based education seems, of course, a rural response to the vexing question (e.g., Theobald, 1997). But the example of place-based education illustrates the difficulty rather than resolves it. Originally proposed by Barnhardt (1980)—in a distinctly rural context (village Alaska)—place-based education has nonetheless been appropriated by the non-rural advocates as applicable *everywhere* (e.g., Hutchinson, 2004). One sees the problem: Good pedagogy is useful everywhere (by definition).[1] Nevertheless, despite the conundrum, the most frequent point of juncture between schools in rural place and the teachers, students, and families in those places is the teaching and learning experience—what happens in classrooms, what students bring home as homework, what messages the curriculum communicates.

For this reason, if emerging researchers (in their dissertations) give specific attention to curriculum and instruction in rural schools, those of us working in rural education ought to be curious. What are these studies up to? Can we assess where the rural interest lies and characterize it? It behooves those invested in rural education (e.g., the readers of this journal) to consider what new literature and theories are emerging from these studies and how such knowledge might be applicable in their own, and in others', research as well as in practice.

[1]Theobald (e.g., 1997; 2009) has consistently argued that the rural issue for curriculum and instruction is rural purpose. Would rural purpose be useful everywhere? We are not attempting a rural curriculum and instruction study ourselves, so we can conveniently allow the question to hang.

Our effort to analyze these studies has ample precedent. Academic journals in some fields do routinely publish synopses of current dissertations (e.g., *Recently Published Dissertations on Community and Junior Colleges*, 2007), and in rural education, moreover, one study has examined dissertations (Harmon, Howley, & Sanders, 1996). That study confined itself to analyzing dissertation *abstracts* and only for five years (1987-1993). The approach enabled a topical categorization of studies, but nothing deeper: it did not allow the authors to investigate what the studies were really up to (e.g., their motives, methods, and meanings).

The current study builds on this earlier work by drilling down to a more nuanced research question: What were the motives and methods evident in the texts of dissertations (published in the 25 years between 1987 and 2012) that simultaneously engaged both curriculum and instruction (C&I) and rural schools and communities?

Theoretical Framework

Whereas much rural education research focuses on policy and culture, the production of dissertations focusing on curriculum and instruction in rural schools raises the question of what these texts want to accomplish and how they approach the task. What purposes do the texts evince? What conceptions guide them? What claims or positions define the texts' interest in rural places? What methods do they deploy? Previous research, at least in mathematics education, has suggested the dissemination of best practice as one likely C&I purpose for rurally oriented studies (Howley, Howley, & Huber, 2005).

To conceptualize "motives," we relied on the work of Kenneth Burke, a 20th century literary theorist. His most relevant contribution is *A Grammar of Motives* (1945/1969)—a theoretical monograph that examined the complexity of human behavior through the construct of *dramatization*. As Burke saw it, life is a drama in which humans engage in complex relationships. Fiction represents those complexities in narrative form: the supposed "realities" are words. Thus, Burke's "motives" are not those of real people, but of the discourse of fictional narrative itself.

One might argue that Burke's approach to human psychology lies at least one step removed and probably more (writer, reader, critic) from reality. For this reason, it is necessarily a narrow application of the idea of "motives." Our adaptation of Burke is possibly even narrower because the "genre" that dissertations represent is much less evocative than the genre of fiction. Like Burke (1945/1969), however, we were interested in the character of the text itself, in what we could learn from that text about the reasons for its creation. In common-sense language we wanted to know *what the texts were up to*. Burke gives one a hint, and our application is by no means an attempt to elaborate Burke's idea or to extend them robustly to empirical research in

social science. Burke provided an insight—one that seemed generative for our investigation of dissertations. To show the relevance of his insight, we recap his analytic scheme in greater detail.

For Burke—again, with respect to fiction and the circumstances and actions of fictional characters—the questions are: Who is taking part in the act (the *actors*)? What methods are they employing (*agency*)? What is occurring (the *event*)? What is the physical location of this occurrence (the *scene*)? And what is the reason for the situation (*purpose*)? Note that the complete Burkean scheme does not seem to be a good fit for a study focusing exclusively on the *narrative* of dissertations.

We make this claim because 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). Other studies might, of course, explore these features of dissertations. For our study, though, just two of the qualities of narrative that Burke described offer analytic possibilities: *agency* and *purpose*.

Making use of two of Burke' categories only, we might have chosen not to connect our analysis to his model at all. But we decided otherwise for two reasons. First, as discussed above, we surmised that the analysis would benefit from a theory of "motives" that pointed to narrative rather than psychological dispositions. Second, we judged that the analysis would benefit from a "culturalist" perspective. As Jerome Bruner (1996) argued, empirical research, like fiction, presents narratives that tell cultural stories. Dissertations are narratives and cultural productions—a perspective that faculty involved with their creation know very well from experience. In this light, Burke's complex sense of "motive" as constituting a sort of cultural grammar gave us a way to frame our interpretations within the intersecting cultures of research in curriculum and instruction, on the one hand, and rural education, on the other. So we credit his influence. But we are not extending his work—at least not directly.

Methods

The research methods entailed the identification of dissertations that fit our criteria (i.e., the intersection of rural education and C&I, published in or after 1987) and the processes we used to analyze the dissertations we identified. We delimited our work to dissertations that culminated doctoral work in North American universities, although not all of the dissertations investigated rural education in North America.

Data Sources and Procedures

ProQuest (formerly Dissertation Abstracts International) is a commercial database that archives North American dissertations; most universities provide access. Using the database and a complex search strategy, we first retrieved a set of dissertation abstracts and previews from the years 1987-2012 that arguably describe the intersection between rurality and curriculum and instruction.[2] Our interest in this time period aligns with (1) DeYoung's (1987) call for an increase in rural education research and (2) a noticeable increase in C&I dissertation literature claiming to have a rural focus since that time.

We cannot be sure that we have all studies that might pertain, but the search strategy, developed across several iterations, yielded 580 documents. Our final selection identified 194 (we could not secure copies of 6) as probably exhibiting substantive engagement—though we subsequently categorized 35, or 18.6%, as motivated by convenience.

In order to make an initial judgment about the studies' substantive engagement with rural education, we divided the 580 titles into six batches for further review. Each group member was assigned three batches of abstracts to review, and the team worked in dyads. Each individual had three choices, based on application of an agreed-upon set of criteria: (1) illustrates an intersection between rurality and C&I, (2) does not illustrate an intersection, and (3) cannot judge. After individual reviews, dyads met to resolve discrepancies. Any discrepancies that could not be resolved during dyad meetings were discussed in the whole group. We thus identified 194 dissertations as probably responsive

[2]The ProQuest database is very poorly indexed, but can nonetheless be flexibly searched. We specified "rural education" OR "rural schools" as the main terms for the time period, but limited (AND) that large set with 31 terms drawn from the available indexing terms (DISKW) to represent the field of Curriculum and Instruction as follows: (High school OR Leadership OR Achievement OR Teachers OR High schools OR Professional development OR Elementary school OR Middle school OR Elementary schools OR Mathematics OR Reform OR Adolescents OR Special education OR Academic achievement OR Teacher OR Reading OR High school students OR Student achievement OR Inclusion OR Middle schools OR Science OR Curriculum OR Reading achievement OR Learning OR Technology integration OR Literacy OR Mentoring OR Gifted OR Collaboration OR Distance education OR Disabilities). We did not search for "instruction" because we operationalized the concept with so many subfields.

[3]To qualify dissertations for further analysis we adapted qualification criteria from those used by AERA's Rural Education SIG to qualify dissertations as rural for judging in its annual dissertation award program, used to distinguish defensibly rural studies from those to which rurality remains tangential. We did not formally judge the "goodness" of dissertations. We did regard some studies as good-to-excellent overall and some also as exemplars within their categories (even "convenience motive").

Many dissertations struck us as mediocre or worse. We do not identify authors because we believe that the problems of bad dissertations are endemic to the *act* as much as to the *actors*.

and eliminated 386 as non-responsive to the criteria adopted.[3] We then retrieved *full manuscripts* of all but the six inaccessible titles, converted each manuscript (n=188) to searchable text, and established an online archive that was made accessible to all group members.

Data Analysis

The Burkean scheme for analyzing motives in fiction uniquely pairs each of the concepts to create a matrix of ten "ratios" (Burke's term; see Burke, 1945/1969, pp. 117-124). Thus, the only pairing relevant to our purposes was the "agency-purpose ratio." Burke's use of *ratio* is not mathematical, however, but refers instead to the tension inherent to each pairing as manifested in the text to which it might be applied. In our case, entire texts exhibit the often complex interplay of agency (method) and purpose (motive). The Burkean approach required us to name the motives of each dissertation and to position the motive in consideration of its stated methods.

Based on an initial reading of about 10 strategically chosen studies, we created three codes with which to categorize the relevant motives for these dissertations: (1) *rural caring motive*, (2) *rural justice motive*, and (3) *rural knowledge motive*. Midway through coding we adopted a fourth motive: (4) *rural convenience motive*. See Figure 1, below, for the definitions, which evolved somewhat as the categorization proceeded. We had frequent recourse to them as we discussed our coding decisions.[4]

We might have devised other motives or additional motives. But both prior experience and the experience of reading and analyzing these texts suggested the ultimate usefulness of these four motives for classifying dissertations uniquely. We continued to elaborate them as coding proceeded, and we discussed their application in great depth in a long series of team meetings, where we finalized our categorization of 10-20 studies at a time. If additional motives had proven relevant, we would have created them (as we did, in fact, with the *rural convenience motive*). In practice, we nuanced our classification with notes about the borderlands between classifications, and we discuss those borderlands briefly in our findings for each motive code.

Over the course of six months, and working at first independently from one another, we each assigned a *single* primary or predominating motive to each dissertation, working in successive sets of 20. Each of us used the full-text, searchable files. Initially, we read dissertations from beginning to end. This process sounds arduous, but "the dissertation" is a *genre* and the familiar five-chapter model (e.g., conceptualization or problem statement, literature review, methods, findings, and discussion) provides a predictable (if not universal) schema. A few dissertations were more original; indeed, one of the 188 dissertations qualifies as a possible world-record for number of chapters—*fifteen*. Initially, we spent perhaps an hour with each study, but by the end, we were usually able to decide on our (individual) coding of a study in about 20 minutes to half an hour. We devoted additional time to reading and re-reading dissertations with discrepant coding decisions, of course. When dissertations seemed to occupy the borderline between codes, the initial coding decision and the subsequent discussion tended to absorb more time and to require additional re-reading.

When all of us had finished our individual coding for a set, we met to discuss the coding decisions (about 10 meetings). Each discussion lasted about 90 minutes. Except for the initial meeting, we held meetings electronically. We tracked our coding decisions on a consolidated spreadsheet, which included a record of the initial coding decisions, the outcome of the discussions for each dissertation, and a brief description of the study (including word counts for "rural"). For many dissertations, moreover, we recorded a comment that summed up the discussion about contested coding decisions, and sometimes included a general impression of dissertation quality (see further discussion later in this article).

Findings

Our findings implicate the process by which we categorized motives and the meanings resulting from that categorization. We discuss these two types of findings in the sections below.

Categorizing Motives

The discussions, it turns out, were a critical part of the investigation because they allowed us to develop joint understandings of the motives of the studies and to develop a sense of what we really intended with the characterization of each motive (and of characterizing "motive" in general). The discussions also forced us to explore the borderland between motives (our decision to assign unique motive codes required us to reach consensus about which of possibly competing motives was most important). Ostensibly, however, we had planned the discussions so as to impose a consensus coding—to establish inter-rater reliability of

[4]Strictly speaking, our "coding" decisions produced a simple categorization of the studies; we cleave to the notion of coding, however, because of the intensity of the work involved in determining how to characterize the studies. We repeatedly contested each other's coding decisions and challenged each other to defend our choices. Sometimes (i.e., with n=15 dissertations) one team member convinced the other two to code differently.

sorts, as follows. The assignment of motive was unanimous for 110 (58.5%) of the 188 studies. For 73 (93.6%) of the 78 contested titles, the code assigned by one rater differed from the one assigned by the other two. In 63 (86.3%) of these contested assignments, the minority coder was convinced by the discussion to change the initial coding, and in 10 (13.7%) instances [69, 97, 168, 340, 393, 403, 427, 451, 471, 535], the view of the minority coder prevailed. For five titles (2.7% of the set of 188) [61, 200, 289, 316, 366] the three coders assigned three different codes—in which case one of the three codes eventually "prevailed"—that is, in none of these highly contested assignments did the *fourth* code surface as more appropriate than any of the three initial codes.

In sum, at least two of three coders assigned the same code to 183 studies (97.3%). We note again, that in these cases, occasionally the discussion resulted not in one coder changing the initially assigned code, but in two coders making a change (n=15 dissertations). Table 1 presents frequencies and percentages, by motive, for the codes finally assigned to the 188 dissertations.

This audit trail, however, shows that the major insights of the study come from discussions about 78 of the 188 dissertations: the borderland between some parings is practically and theoretically interesting. But so, we think, is the central tendency disclosed by the studies that were coded unanimously. Table 2 provides an account of the recodings at issue in these discussions (discussions for a given study sometimes resulted in two recodings rather than one; hence the number of recodings exceeds the number of dissertations).

Characterizing Motives

In this section we describe the four motives, illustrated with passages from the studies categorized in each (see Figure 1). For each motive, however, we also describe the relevant borderland between motive codes (see Table 2). Of course, there are two sides to each border. For instance, in the case of *justice*: the knowledge-justice borderland holds 9 titles, whereas the justice-knowledge borderland holds 13 titles (again, see Table 2). The relevant borderlands are considered, below, from each vantage separately. We might have dealt with the borderlands separately, but the central tendencies loom larger both empirically and practically. Additional commentary about the borderlands, however, appears in the "Discussion" section.

Knowledge. This motive is the only one that exhibits prominent borderlands[5] with all three others (see Table 2). The description of this motive—accounting for 64% of the 188 dissertations—identifies works in which we judged the "ratio" of purpose and agency to privilege "concern for an issue of professional [C&I] knowledge" above competing motives.

For the 70% of *rural knowledge* studies, this motive is easy to characterize. The iconic *rural knowledge* study concentrates whatever agency it musters on a C&I concern that remains stolidly at the center of scrutiny, whatever the rural engagement. Indeed, the rural concern is almost self-evidently more peripheral (as with the phrase "rural context"). For instance:

> The purpose of this study was to explore three rural Louisiana PK-12 schools with high percentages of minority, low SES populations and to find out how activities, conditions, events, policies, and procedures in each school might be associated with their consistent growth in SPS across the period 2001-2005. (Dissertation 238)

Though not exactly an after-thought, rural is a sort of circumstance in which unmovable C&I concerns are "set." These writers imagine a C&I concern defended as very important and reset it to a *context* a bit different from the one in which studies usually examine it. Often the unusual rural "setting" serves to justify the study (in the worst cases, the alleged "research gap" consists only of the want of rurally "set" studies of a generic C&I issue, without the context influencing in any way the conceptualization of the issue).

Our record summarized the purposes for each study, and the most common purpose within the knowledge category (not in its borderlands) addressed a range of influences on the "success" of students, schools, teachers, and parents.[6] Success, of course, requires struggle, and in a great many of these studies the most important adversary in the struggle was some feature, or multiple features, of the (aforesaid) rural *context*. Here is one characteristic assertion of this sort:

> The third constraint emerging concerned the role of rural culture. Issues of poverty, illiteracy, students' lack of science experiences, students' lack of "cultural" experiences, and the lack of community resources were prevalent. (Dissertation 538)

[5] Based on our discussion of the 36 titles (30% of the total 119 for this motive) where the initial coding was not unanimous.

[6] Success is an important American virtue: it does not imply actual accomplishment, but the trappings associated with a presumption of accomplishment—good grades, graduation, well-paid work, nice wardrobe, and so forth in the case of individuals; but for schools the sine qua non was often test scores, and we found many studies that attempted to account for the test-score success of rural schools serving impoverished communities.

Rural knowledge motive: The combination of method (including ontological and epistemological perspectives if stated) and stated purpose ("purpose of study," research questions, findings) that renders paramount (as evident in the discourse of the study) concern for an issue of professional knowledge. Note: use of this motive means that other motives are less prominent, but could nonetheless be evident. The knowledge concern in play need not have a characteristically rural aspect, but rural features would (weakly to strongly) be an aspect of the predominating knowledge issue.

Rural convenience motive: Despite selection on the basis of partial information for inclusion in the study, the complete study manuscript exhibits no concern for rural context or content, but instead notes only that the units of analysis are "set" rurally. Such a study will at best cite rural studies very thinly; will not define "rural"; and will not frame research questions or answers with respect to issues or implications salient to rural schools or communities. Such a study will generally use the word "rural" in a pro-forma, self-evident fashion: and far more rarely than most studies in this data set.

Rural justice motive: The combination of method (including ontological and epistemological perspectives if stated) and stated purpose ("purpose of study," research questions, findings) that renders paramount (as evident in the discourse of the study) concern for an ethical issue. Note: use of this motive means that other motives are less prominent, but could nonetheless be evident. The justice concern in play need not have a characteristically rural aspect, but rural features would (weakly to strongly) be an aspect of the predominating ethical issue.

Rural caring motive: The combination of method (including ontological and epistemological perspectives if stated) and stated purpose ("purpose of study," research questions, findings) that leads (as evident in the discourse of the study) to appreciation of rural ways of living, being, knowing, and loving (aka "the substantive rural"). Note: "appreciation" does not necessarily mean approval, but must indicate at least recognition of the importance and existence of such affordances well beyond what is typical in C&I studies.

Figure 1. Definitions of motives.

This sort of construction was common in these (well within-border) studies, though it appears in degrees and qualities. In one study, for instance, the "successful" rural entities were all middle-class or upper-middle-class—a characteristic that remained oddly unmentioned in the narrative.[7]

The studies that occupied borderlands with *justice* and *caring* tended to exhibit a greater appreciation of critique. One study (Dissertation 250), to which we returned several times in discussions, lies in the knowledge-justice borderland. It was conducted as part of a large class-size reduction project in one of those universities to which ample funds flow downhill. But the dissertation took a critical turn, partly based on involvement with rural schools and communities and the rural upbringing of its author, but more prominently based on its very thoughtful exploration of the constructs of "effective teacher" and "good student." The word "rural" appears in the dissertation just 33 times across 132 pages of narrative. The study also exhibits very thin engagement with rural education research. Nonetheless, it opens in a remarkably moving and lyrical reflection on rural life. The rural promise of the opening perhaps lay still-born because the author did not receive appropriate help. Whatever the case, the assistance that the author actually received did not help enlarge the specifically rural sensibility (and good sense) that the author *actually brought to the work*. We will have more to say more about such neglect (of rurality) in the discussion section.

The borderland with *rural convenience* does in fact resemble the within-border privileging of a C&I concern, but treads closer than the others within this code to a complete lack of engagement with rural sensibilities, concerns, or issues. One study illustrates rather well our dilemma in deciding to retain in *rural knowledge* a dissertation with contested coding decisions. In this case, two of us initially coded it as *rural convenience*: asserting an only pro-forma connection with rural realities (as per the definition of *rural convenience*). This study used the word "rural" a meager 11 times in its 282 pages of narrative. The privileged theme is teacher leadership in small rural schools (maritime Canada). No rural works appear in the reference list; it (obviously) devotes no room to rural concerns in the literature review; and it does not define rural. These characteristics and the rare use of "rural" led two of us to the *rural convenience* motive. In discussion, however, we were convinced that the issue itself had salience to rural places and schools (the "many hats" worn by rural educators is a familiar rural education theme—even though not drawn into the study from that literature). Moreover, the rural places received description in the narrative: readers can indeed recognize them as rural. So we decided to classify it as *rural knowledge*—just barely. We learned where to draw our lines from such discussions. In a sense, the lines themselves are not so important—being

[7]This commonality vexed us across the degrees and qualities of the (mis)construction in these studies. We live in Appalachia and are very familiar with the cultural realities and the regionally embedded processes of impoverishment. The regular misrepresentation of such realities in U.S. society is understandable, but to see them deployed without question among those qualifying as scholars—across all rural regions—is just depressing.

Table 1
Dissertation Final Coding

MOTIVE	Frequency		Unanimity of Coding	
	N	%	N	%
rural knowledge	119	64	83	70
rural convenience	35	19	15	43
rural justice	18	10	6	33
rural caring	16	8	6	38

Table 2
Borderland Recodings

MOTIVE	Borderland Recodings							
	FROM knowledge		FROM convenience		FROM justice		FROM caring	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
rural knowledge			15	37	13	32	13	32
rural convenience	19	79			5	21	0	0
rural justice	9	56	1	6			6	38
rural caring	10	91	0	0	1	9		

Note. "Recodings" refers to the re-assignment of a code by the researchers, and not to studies per se. Coding was unanimous for 110 studies, but in the remaining 78 studies, either one (n=63 studies) or two (n=15 studies) researchers were convinced in discussion to change the initial coding decisions.

"in" or "out" is not the point. At the same time, a study like this one does illustrate the problem with *rural knowledge* as a motive: the motive is not very rural, and so the resulting "knowledge" cannot typically be very rural either. This is a genuine problem for C&I dissertations (and writers and committees) variously approaching rural engagement.

Convenience. As noted previously, we began coding with three motives instead of four (i.e., knowledge, justice, and caring). We initially believed that our criteria for qualification were sufficiently rigorous to eliminate studies of this sort. We were wrong, and so developed our *rural convenience motive* code to correct our mistake[8] and provide a category for the relevant titles (see Figure 1 for the definition). We categorized 19% of the 188 titles as convenience studies—the second most common coding.

The definition (see Figure 1) imposes a stringent standard to permit coding as *rural convenience*, and consequently we found the studies thus categorized referenced "rural teachers," "rural schools," "rural districts," and even (in Dissertation 469) "rural states"—and usually little else. In these dissertations rural had no substantive or conceptual meaning at all. The usage was indeed only occasionally defined (usually an in indefensible way—Dissertation 469 notably "defined" the word "rural" as all schools in three not very rural states: yes indeed, that was the entire "definition"). These studies posted the fewest instances of rural in their pages—a median of 17 times.[9]

We surmise that most of these studies selected schools or districts because the location was convenient for researchers studying a school or district in which they were employed, for instance:

> I studied a ... program at a rural high school in South Carolina.... I was both teacher and researcher; I collected writing samples of reactions to the course materials and to classroom reading assignments.

[8]We developed this code also to deal with the phenomenon it represented to our process—that is, the challenge of judging a work as exhibiting a degree of engagement sufficient to qualify it as a rural study (see Coladarci, 2007).

[9]For instance, Dissertation 500 used the word 33 times, 18 in the phrase "rural midwestern school district," and though Dissertation 533 used it 102 times in reference to three schools, one of the schools was a city school and one a suburban school according to the federal Common Core of Data; the study did not provide a description of the schools sufficient to permit readers an independent judgment (it named the schools and we independently retrieved more information about their locale than the narrative itself provided).

> (Dissertation 547, which uses the word "rural" 12 times in 449 narrative pages)

Principals, superintendents, and consultants completed studies on this basis (and not only, we add, in those categorized as *rural convenience*).

Less often, but notably, another convenience of "rural setting" was said to be the absence of studies about a generic program or outlook conducted in a rural school or district. The claim is defensible, but in *rural convenience* studies, the "rural research gap" was never adequately (i.e., beyond a sentence or two) explained, conceptualized, or defended. For instance, the following excerpt constitutes nearly the entire defense, and it is repeated several times, each time without any evidence to warrant the claim:

> A review of the literature regarding [a set of theories] reveals that many journal articles have been written about these theories, yet little information regarding their implementation into rural public schools exists. (Dissertation 469)

The cursory engagement of *rural convenience* studies qualifies the usage of "rural" in them as careless. Hence, more than an oversight, the cursory engagement seems a methodological blunder—one that neglects a key feature of the presenting issue.

The most notable borderland with *rural convenience*, perhaps not surprisingly, was with *rural knowledge* (see Table 2). The recoded studies in this borderland also positioned rural context as a deficiency, but especially with respect to state or federal requirements. For instance:

> The purpose of this qualitative case study was to conduct a formative assessment to explore courses of action that would assist educators and leaders of secondary math and science educators [i.e., administrators] to help students achieve...standards and postsecondary success in compliance with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. (Dissertation 130)

This statement occurs early and often in the narrative and is remarkable for the absence of the word "rural," as if the power of the State overwhelms the doubt and skepticism that inquiry otherwise demands.

Justice. Whereas the previous coding indicated what we would call a technical concern very typical in C&I dissertations,[10] *rural justice* studies privilege the representation (and investigation) of an ethical issue (see Figure 1). We use the term broadly to include features of moral action (e.g., micropolitics); systemic domination (e.g., manipulation by the State or corporate power); or cultural privilege (e.g., Whiteness, racism).

In 14 of the 18 *rural justice* studies, the prevailing injustices (racism, sexism, poverty, and special education status) received the focal attention and "rural context" was merely or mostly the setting for the injustice. These 14 studies were thus the analogue of the most common *rural knowledge* studies, but with ethics instead of *techne* strongly in the foreground. Predictably[11] racism was a presenting condition investigated or strongly implicated in the plurality of these studies (n=7) [51, 61, 84, 313, 416, 423, 427]. The others implicated sexism (n=3) [19, 471, 485]; white rural poverty (n=3) [290, 393, 562]; and special education (n=1) [8].

In the other four studies [42, 204, 366, 561] the putative context became the privileged center, in the guise of the unfair treatment of rural places or people. One of these is a rural-award-winning ethnographic study of a district's engagement with state-imposed reform. Not surprisingly, three of the four represented contested coding decisions with *rural caring*, but subsequent discussion convinced us that the ethical consideration was primary. The uncontested title [42] was a very weak study, but it nonetheless clumsily privileged an ethical issue.

Caring. The definition (see Figure 1) indicates that stated purpose and methods jointly demonstrate the dissertation's appreciation of the substantive rural (e.g., in discussion of rural economies, rural cultures, rural communities, rural ways of thinking, and so on). Such a treatment in studies demonstrates a strong degree of engagement with rural dilemmas, issues, or realities (variously construed).[12] We illustrate the ratio of agency and purpose jointly enlarging such engagement:

> The purpose of this grounded theory study was to understand the process of change that occurred in moving from a traditional curriculum structure to a community-based curriculum in a rural secondary school. (Dissertation 495)

Many studies claimed the approach of "grounded theory," but this was the only study among the 188 to develop and defend explanations (the theorizing part of "grounded theory")

[10]Issues of power and ethics (as well as issues of "context") remain, in most treatments of pedagogy, subsidiary to *techne*: the concern with tool-use, for instance (Dissertation 477) identifying the barriers and facilitators of "technology integration." One could, with this formulation, substitute *any* C&I concern and complete a relevant study. Typical C&I studies explore some aspect of the received wisdom known as "best practice."

[11]Stephen Jay Gould (1981) among many others has noted that race prejudice more than class prejudice has been the most virulent of the injustices prevalent in the US.

[12]This code indicates a heightened representation in the narrative of "the substantive rural," a construct that comprises rural ways of living and being (see Howley & Howley, 2014). *Rural caring* is not warranted by an author's personal attachment to rural places or experiences: we sorted out this misreading in our discussions because we were sometimes misled by authorial confessions.

based on its analyses. The agency, one might observe, was well used—used in a way capable of realizing the intended purpose. Further, studying the move to a community-based curriculum in a rural school—what it was, why it happened, how teachers made sense of it—exhibited interest for the connections between a rural school and its community. The study provided rich detail about the rurality of what one might call its problem set. Such richness of detail was clearly uncommon in this data set (see definition in Figure 1).

This productive relationship (tension) between agency and purpose was apparent in all the studies we flagged as *rural caring,* although a prominent borderland existed with *rural knowledge*: in 9 studies, we changed 10 individual *rural knowledge* codes to *rural caring* (i.e., for one study, two of us changed our initial coding decisions). In some of the contested coding decisions, the stated research question seemed initially to some of us to privilege a C&I issue (*rural knowledge*), but we all subsequently agreed in discussion that the findings and conclusions demonstrated strong engagement with the substantive rural. For example, one dissertation put its purpose as follows:

> I examine how literacy reform was understood and enacted along two dimensions: (a) as part of the broader school reform effort that took shape in New York State by the mid-1990s, and (b) in relation to dominant CTE discourses about the need to change work-oriented courses to integrate academic and occupational concepts. (Disertation 89)

This passage mentions no connection to rural life or people. The full narrative (which exhibits 263 usages of "rural") nonetheless articulates a focus on rural people who seek adult lives close to home, pursuing working-class occupations—a theme well represented in rural education literature (e.g., Burnell, 2003; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Theobald, 1997). The method (agency: qualitative case study) and findings are consistent with the motive of *rural caring*. Recognition of the rurally salient link between a localist aspiration and community sustainability embodies the study's appreciation of rural ways of approaching family and community life. Comparatively few C&I studies in the data set exhibit such insight.

An addendum about quality. We did not plan to assess the overall quality of dissertations. At first we thought such a judgment must be irrelevant; even if many studies were bad, we thought it would not matter to our analysis. Perhaps it does not.

But we suspect it *does* matter, in part because, even though we tried hard not to make such judgments, the time we devoted to reading and discussion meant that such judgments were unavoidable. We made informal notes about such impressions from reading and discussion, especially when problems with method and language interfered with a clear reading of "motive" or when the description of methods was so confused that we had a difficult time pinpointing "agency." We thus believe our study has a responsibility to report an impression of quality, even though such a report may seem harsh or insufficiently systematic to some readers who are involved with helping doctoral students complete dissertations.

What do we claim to have found? A previous version of this manuscript reported that far too many dissertations were *wretched*—that was the word originally used. In our joint and considered view perhaps a quarter or a third were poor or worse. And many more were just mediocre. It seemed remarkable to us, and depressing.

What were our standards? They were the usual ones—for instance: (1) well-articulated conceptualization of an empirical issue; (2) a reading of related literature that was ample and critical (not just a recap of one study after another, for instance); (3) methods that were fully detailed; (4) a set of empirical data sufficient to address the conceptualization; (5) a set of findings arguably justified by the data and methods; and (6) recommendations and interpretations commensurate with the findings and the conceptualization.

We do not offer such judgments about individual studies—our system did not provide for it. All we have is an extensive and intensive experience of reading and analyzing the dissertations, an experience that informed a very strong impression. We will have a bit more to say about the quality issue, below.

Discussion

Engaging rurality is apparently not easy (see Coladarci, 2007). Two of us (e.g., Howley & Howley, 1999) have explained why more often than we care to remember, but to summarize briefly:

(1) rural is a set of meanings, and meaningfulness is very difficult to appreciate;
(2) a key barrier to appreciation of such meaningfulness (evident in so many of these 188 studies) is the deficiency ascribed to rural ways of being by the cultural mainstream: the ignorance is so rarely subjected to doubt that it often seems willful, and;
(3) institutionally speaking, schooling has purposively distanced itself from community: the training of educators has for generations inscribed this distance as needful.

One upshot is the apparent difficulty of engaging the substantive rural in empirical work in education, and C&I may be an especially difficult realm for such engagement.

Recently, however, C&I engagement has (it seems) substantially multiplied. Although we cannot be entirely sure because the ProQuest effort is so badly indexed, we did

perform a simple comparison search (in March 2014) using our basic umbrella search: *"rural education" OR "rural schools."* The results, if even moderately reliable,[13] are telling. In the 25 years from 1962 through 1986, that search returned just 145 items. The same search for the years 1987 through 2012 returned 1,845 titles—13 times as many.

The senior authors in fact began their own engagement with rural education scholarship about 1987. At that time, almost none of the studies cited in the most-arguably-engaged half of our 188 dissertations existed. Craig recalls reading Jonathan Sher's *Rural Education: A Reassessment of the Conventional Wisdom* (1977) in 1987 and the same author's *Heavy Meddle* (Sher, 1986). They were eye-openers and game-changers (to employ the applicable clichés). He, like others with deep rural experience (see, e.g., Williams, 1973), had not seriously considered looking at schooling through rural lenses. In any case, it was an exciting time for a young, contrarian scholar.

In a sense, (some of) these 188 dissertations are part of what has ensued in the emerging field since the 1980s. In the postwar era (1945-1965), rural was a laggard, and rural education meant helping rural schooling come into alignment with the high modernist program of teaching specialization, consolidation, and scientific management (DeYoung, 1987; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; cf. Scott, 2012). However, the leading rural education scholarship of the 1977-1997 era worked to *reconceptualize* the place of rurality in schooling. In the 1980s and beyond, generative pedagogical engagement in rural places arguably depended on the emergence of the reconceptualization. At the same time, much of the mainstream scholarship in C&I and its simplified translations for education practitioners continued to promote a high modernist version of utility (reframed in terms of standards and accountability testing).[14]

Examination of dissertations coded with the "rural knowledge motive" and the "rural convenience motive" reveals that the problems explored, even in the few studies that engage rurality more strongly, overlook the possibility that the mainstream assumptions in C&I could be wrong. On one hand, this misstep is inherent in a devotion to C&I knowledge, and perhaps this level of critique should not be expected of novice scholars: they are only following orders. On the other hand, we think that legitimate rural engagement requires such doubt. More importantly, the vocation of scholar is a critical one, especially in education: it is a calling that must *sponsor* critique from the start. For this reason, we have hoped to foster a skeptical disposition in our own doctoral students.

In comparison to the discourse of improvement in many "rural knowledge" and "rural convenience" studies, critical intent seemed an alien project. There is a connection between this assessment and our overall "addendum" on quality. Many of the studies coded with these motives asked pro-forma questions, failed to conceptualize any sort of legitimate inquiry, and collected data insufficient for a bona fide empirical effort. Even the C&I literature base in many of them was thin. And, of course, many failed entirely to consult rural scholarship in education or sociology. Too many are just bad studies!

Why might this be so (if it is, and we realize that with this judgment of poor quality we are perhaps violating the norms of collegiality)? Credentialism (Collins, 2002) probably exerts an influence. Briefly, credentialism is to degrees what grade-inflation is to grades: the standard for higher degrees and higher grades becomes severed from evident scholarship. The degree is needed for something else (new jobs, higher status, larger salary).[15] Credentialism might have exerted a much stronger influence on the 13-fold increase observed across the 25 years: more students started to complete doctorates in education, and rural education was regarded as empty territory. Indeed, quite a few of the *rural knowledge* dissertations justify their efforts (weakly) with the claim that though previous important work (e.g., evaluating a mathematics program) exists, the previous studies did not conduct evaluations in rural "sites." Rural engagement was worse than incidental in such studies; it was an excuse.

A bad study is unfortunate in its own right, but the credential subsequently authorizes the ill-prepared to intervene unwisely in rural schools (e.g., via rurally unresponsive professional development) and to seek funding for it (one has reviewed proposals of exactly this sort of work from young scholars). The junior author is a doctoral student for whom the experience of reading these studies has disclosed to her much about how and why scholarship fails so miserably at the doctoral level. Jacqueline recently spoke with James Scott, political theorist and leader of the Yale Agrarian Studies program, who wrote the luminous *Seeing Like a State* (Scott, 1998). In the course of the interview, Scott argued that doctoral students should tackle more intellectually original and ambitious projects. Such projects were rare in this data set (fewer than 10 per

[13]ProQuest maintains no record of the use of its indexing terms, as with official database thesauri (e.g., the ERIC Thesaurus). That sort of effort requires such arcane and expensive staff as an actual lexicographer. The digitized world finds such care and attention increasingly unnecessary: a view we don't share at all.

[14]See Scott (1998) for *high modernism*: what he means, in part, is planners' certainty that they know what is best for everyone (based on their grasp of science, technology, and power). Neoliberalism—the ideology of globalization—extends 20th century high-modernism into the 21st century as a distinctly capitalist project (Russia and China having taken the "capitalist road" in the meantime).

[15]After all, a long time ago Etzioni (1970) actually valorized the doctorate as the most instrumental of all credentials!

the standards in our "quality addendum"). Scott, of course, works at an elite university with largely privileged students (in whom one would expect reasonable preparation).

We have personally scaffolded the attempts of many poorly prepared students to create good-to-excellent rural education studies. That process is a monumental effort for advisors and especially for students. It takes many years. In the study's data set, we think we see too many poorly prepared students receiving far, far too little support from advisors (for whatever reasons—and we are familiar with many).

The resultant array of bad studies appalls us, and the poor quality of many dissertations is part of the reason we have chosen to identify dissertations by a number tied to a list not included in this manuscript. Though sometimes tempted, we did not grade dissertations, so we cannot go further than this general impression—which all three of us nonetheless received very strongly (working independently on each study). One (which earned a "Doctor of Philosophy" credential) contained just 47 pages of (foolish) narrative (badly written).

Recommendations

Based on our analysis and experience in conducting and advising rural studies, we offer two sets of recommendations. Ideally, both sets of recommendations would be applied to rural education studies in C&I. But we know of many C&I students willing to hear such advice even when faculty who might guide their studies were not interested to entertain the idea of rural engagement.

For Students

- If the focus of your work is C&I knowledge but you are genuinely interested in rural matters, run the risk of having your paradigm altered by reading significant works in rural sociology and education.
- If your program will not allow you to entertain a rural topic, consider changing schools. We know students who have made this decision: they tell us about it.
- If you cannot find rural expertise locally, recruit an external committee member.
- Ask yourself what makes math, language arts, social studies, chemistry, or computer sciences *rural*. See Ted Coladarci's (2007) "swan song" article (this journal) to get a deeper idea of what rurally relevant studies entail.
- If a rural site is simply convenient, say so. And avoid blanket cover-ups such as claiming to "fill research gaps."

For Dissertation Directors and Other Faculty

- Rural education research literature exists. Expect students with rural-related questions or study sites to find it, read it, and cite it.
- If "rural" merits mention in a study's title or abstract, insist that students read rural works and consider them seriously.
- Include a committee member with rural scholarship on committees of studies that aim to engage rural issues.
- Entertain the idea that context infuses or even *is* content—an insight that seems particularly salient to the knowledge that is, or might be, taught in schools.

We could give more advice, but these few suggestions are practical: short, clear, and—we hope—immediately useful. If similar guidance had even partially been followed, the story we have told in this manuscript would have been rather different. Rural convenience studies would have been less common, and the rural engagement of the studies coded with the other motives would have been notably stronger.

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