Commentary on the 2010 CAE Presidential Address

Reducing Inequities by Linking Basic Research and Political Action

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In this comment, on Terri McCarty's Presidential Address, I focus on her dynamic approach to investigation that contributes to a vibrant and constructively critical exploration of the place of basic research, critical policy analysis, and activism in the anthropology of education and the social sciences more broadly. [basic research, critical inquiry, social activism, language policy]

Terri McCarty's Presidential Address (McCarty this issue) is provocative and informative for many reasons. She reveals some of the forms that the crisis narrative has taken in educational research and practice. She describes her recent research on language survival at Puente de Hózhǫ́, a trilingual (Navajo–Spanish–English) public school in northern Arizona. In this comment, I focus on yet a third important issue McCarty's work embodies: a dynamic approach to investigation that I will refer to as "design research." This dimension of her presidential address and the full body of her work contributes to a vibrant and constructively critical exploration of the place of basic research, critical policy analysis, and activism in the anthropology of education and the social sciences more broadly.

McCarty agrees with Emihovich's (2005:305) call for increased anthropological activism in these "deeply troubling and unsettling times" and concludes that policy activism is an appropriate stance for CAE. She then asks: How do we actualize that policy in practice? In order to describe McCarty's answer to this question, I will distinguish between professional social science, public social science, policy studies, and critical studies (cf. Buroway et al. 2004; Campbell and Lassiter 2010; Foley and Valenzuela 2006; Hymes 1972; Sanday 1976; Schensul 2010). These distinctions turn on the two axes: the purpose or function of research and the audience of research.

Professional social science is concerned with basic research, the discovery of new facts. In its pure form, it entails solving the puzzles of its discipline employing its rules, canons, and practices. Other members of the researchers' discipline comprise the audience for basic research. Questions of use and application are left to others. The division of labor between researcher and practitioner is evident in the "research-development-dissemination-evaluation" (R-D-D-E) model (Brown et al. 1999) widely used in the field of education. In the R-D-D-E model, researchers frame and study the important educational questions and transmit their findings to practitioners through publications, presentations, and workshops. Practitioners in districts, schools, and classrooms, in turn, attempt to put research results into practice. A second dichotomy exists routinely between researchers and practitioners. Practitioners are often the *objects* of study, rather than *participants* in constructing research and interpreting results. Value orientations, long established in the field, underpin and sustain these dichotomies. The abstract mental work associated with conducting basic research has traditionally been held in higher regard than the concrete practical work of applying research (Lagemann 2000).

Some social scientists shift their attention from conducting research to producing policy statements, writing op-ed pieces, or appearing on talk shows to inform the public about

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the implications of basic research findings. Critically informed policy studies concentrate on the deleterious effects of public policy on groups poorly served by education and other social institutions within society. Although informing the public about questionable legal, medical, media, and corporate practices is commendable, it can be dangerous for researchers to write op-ed articles for newspapers or appear on television talk shows because these are often thin pieces aimed at passive audiences. Researchers also have to be careful about writing policy statements. If they are not well substantiated by fundamental research, researchers can be victimized by a client, become beholden to a patron, or be ignored entirely.

McCarty aligns with social scientists such as Buroway and colleagues (2004) who seek to restore a balance between basic research and a commitment to social justice. They challenge basic researchers, policy writers, and critical researchers to engage in dialogue about issues of social concern, drawing on bodies of theoretical knowledge and peer-reviewed empirical findings. Social critiques require a solid theoretical and empirical foundation they claim. Without grounding policy recommendations in solid basic research, sociological and anthropological claims can evaporate into shrill and empty commentaries. However, without a commitment to social justice, even well-crafted empirical studies will not necessarily further the public interest.

Public social science, as articulated by Buroway and colleagues (2004), is aimed at audiences outside of the academy. That implies that the public sociologist or anthropologist conducts research in much the way a professional social scientist would, but the report at the end of the investigation is aimed at a different audience. So, too, the sociologist or anthropologist who conducts public social science is like the colleague who conducts professional social science in terms of his or her relationship to the research "subjects": in both cases, the study is done *on* the subjects.

McCarty incorporates the injunction from critical ethnographers to document oppression in its many forms and to make this information accessible to the public. She invokes Gilmore (2008:111–112) who implores us to speak "fearlessly, courageously and continuously," not only within our close (and sometimes stagnant) academic circles but also to our local, national, and international publics. McCarty, as do critical researchers, holds up basic research for examination in terms of its presuppositions, often challenging those presuppositions as arbitrary, or as not meeting the moral presuppositions of the discipline. Like critical researchers, McCarty attempts to give voice to the voiceless and challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions and actions of the privileged by offering a cultural critique of ruling groups, ruling ideologies, and institutions. In her hands, writing a critical ethnography becomes a political statement (cf. Foley and Valenzuela 2006; González 2010).

Even though McCarty calls her studies "critical ethnography," she is more than a critic because she aids in the reconstruction of educational environments. It appears to me that she is engaged in an ethnographically informed version of "design research" (Hutchins 1995; Mehan 2008, 2011). This form of design research projects a different relationship between the researcher and the "subjects" of research and the researcher and "audience" of completed research. In her studies of language policy, McCarty resists dividing the labor between ethnographers and practitioners such that researchers conduct "basic research" while practitioners implement research findings. She strives to sustain an approach in which practitioners and researchers coconstruct basic knowledge and simultaneously attempt to build progressive policy and implement that policy in useful practice.

As we see in McCarty's studies at Rough Rock and Puente de Hózhǫ́, researchers and practitioners engaged in design work together to frame research problems and work together to seek their solutions (McCarty 2002, 2012; McCarty et al. 1991, 2011). Committed to furthering theory and explanation as well as to improving educational systems,

practitioners and researchers work together to develop articulate explanations regarding how and why programs, designs, or ideas do or do not work. The challenge for such collaborations is, on the one hand, to respect the local needs of practitioners, while, on the other hand, to develop more useable and generative knowledge for the field. Design research demands that investigation and the development of an end product or innovation occur in cycles of design, enactment, analysis, and redesign. The skills, goals, and knowledge of the participants, as well as the relationships that exist between the actors involved in the work, significantly affect the ability to build and transfer theoretical understandings. Design-research projects, sometimes followed by the joint authorship of a publication (e.g., McCarty et al. 1991, 2011), illustrate the advantages of collaboration around problems of practice. These intimate collaborations illustrate how a researcher can become an actor who is instrumental in changing practice, and practitioners can acquire a new language that guides their work.

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