Composing Research

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INTRODUCTION

The history of composition studies is one of conflict and struggle. As a field relatively new to the academy, we have struggled to be valued, debated our very roots, and created tension among ourselves as researchers and teachers. The current debate between quantitative and qualitative researchers in composition has been discussed before. In that respect, this work is not new because it emerges from the firmly-established rift between humanists and scientists, between ethnographers and experimentalists.

But *how* we have debated about research methods is of greater concern here than *that* we have debated: in other words, the rhetoric of our own scholarship forms the foundation for this work. This foundation allows for more than merely another review of tensions among the field's researchers and allows us to address instead the false distinctions among competing epistemologies as composition scholars have defined them, reasons other than the epistemological for our new attention to personal narrative, the narrative potential of numerical evidence, and the notion of context as it is understood (and misunderstood) by our researchers.

At risk in any work that attempts to dissolve dichotomies is the tendency to create new dichotomies instead. For that reason, *context* is a pivotal, fluid term on which this work hinges: In what contexts do we construct arguments about our research? In what contexts do we conduct research in the first place? Which contexts demand certain research methods more than other methods? In what ways does the current research debate in composition decontextualize the problems we debate?

Throughout my work on this project, I engaged in conversations about it in various contexts, and I was often confused by reactions to

this work-in-progress. Too often, my defense of the quantitative and my argument for better training in research design and statistics in composition programs were misunderstood, and my attempt to provide a contextualist view that collapses the qualitative/quantitative dichotomy in our research was sometimes plainly ignored or resulted in a certain defensiveness from some listeners.

For example, in one job interview in 1998, two search committee members asked me questions following the discussion of my work that clearly indicated they weren't willing to let go of the dichotomy we currently have. One asked, "Yeah, but, really: What's the *best* method most suited for writing centers?" and the other asked, "If you're so into the quantitative, why don't you answer any questions with quantitative responses?"

In addition, we can easily find examples of scholars using a defensive tone on "both sides of the fence," indicating the intense passion accompanying debates about research in our field. While I try to avoid such a tone myself, the passion that drives our language and voices in any debate makes our field incredibly rich and beautifully imperfect, especially in tone.

My own passion to contribute to this dialogue and the passion of my listeners and readers along the way resulted, of course, in several misunderstandings. Often, I wrestled with what I found to be puzzling misperceptions of something I *thought* I was making clear. So I'll try to make a few points clear from the start here:

1. A contextualist approach to research does not (cannot, should not) value one set of research methods over another. In no manner will I argue that "quantitative" or "qualitative" methods are always "better." Instead, this work calls our attention to the contexts from which our research questions come (and to the questions themselves)—contexts and questions that should guide our methodological decisions, whatever they might be. In some contexts, one method might be more appropriate and illuminating. In other contexts, another method might be better suited to our needs. In still other contexts, a blend might be necessary to fully answer our questions. But in *no* context should we choose our method first, allowing *it* to

narrow what kinds of questions we can ask, for to do so is to ignore context itself.

2. In this work, I adopt a fluid definition of the term "context." Here, context means more than merely "place" or location, such as "in a writing center" or "in my classroom," as we so often see the term defined. Indeed, location alone as a defining feature of research contexts or methods can cause confusion if we're not careful. MacNealy (1999), for instance, also attempted to avoid the qualitative/quantitative dichotomy by using instead the distinction between "library-based" and "empirical" research; however, MacNealy acknowledged that such a distinction "could also create some confusion because empirical research can be done in a library. . . . [And] in the most rigorous of scientific disciplines, considerable library research must be done" (7). Location becomes, then, a troublesome and narrow feature of research methods and contexts.

Instead, context is not so rigidly defined here, but is "released" as a flexible construct defined by its own power and its own variability—both stemming from the moment a researcher wants to know something. For instance, two researchers in the same writing center could pursue two very different questions, creating two different contexts in the same location. One researcher might ask, "Does the pattern of student attendance and student concerns differ between portfolio-based classrooms and non-portfolio classrooms?" Here, this researcher might design an instrument to keep track of student attendance and concerns, seeking numerical evidence found in attendance records and textual evidence found in tutors' records of each session. The second researcher might ask, "What tutorial strategies are being used with hearing-impaired students who attend our writing center?" This researcher would most likely observe and record tutorials, hoping to observe patterns in tutoring strategies, possibly interviewing the tutors and students observed in action. Both researchers, while working in the same location, will choose research methods based on their questions within their location, not on the location only. While place might determine what research methods are *possible*, the research question determines what research methods are *necessary*.

3. I have no personal preference for any one kind of research method. Though some friends, colleagues, and acquaintances sometimes preface their remarks with "Nothing against your interest in numbers, but" or "Given your preference for the quantitative," or while some might expect me to use such methods *all* the time, I am merely curious about everything—as I imagine you to be, too. Narrowed, personal attachment to methodological choices cloud our vision of what those choices are in the first place. Instead, my passion stems from a fascination with the myriad of possibilities we encounter when seeking information and insight. Rhetoric and composition is exciting because we have *all* research tools available to us, useful at any moment of curiosity.

4. Finally, the presence of the highly risky term "paradigm," as I construct it in this work, invokes, of course, a Kuhnian image—one on which our field does not entirely agree. When I began this work, I agreed with Connors (1983) that composition might be incapable of constructing the kind of paradigm that Kuhn (1970) outlined in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. But Connors also speculated that perhaps such a paradigm might still emerge one day in the future.

To help him articulate what a paradigm is, Kuhn pointed to three kinds of work in which a field would engage if truly driven by a successful paradigm. First, a field tries to capture and describe a class of information that it feels will reveal the nature of things, and attempt to refine that information as the field moves forward. This first class of information defines the content of a field and the scope of what *kinds* of nature we hope to reveal. For us, we hope to identify, reveal, and describe the nature of *rhetoric*, the nature of *composition*.

Second, a field actively tries to make comparisons, observations, applications, and predictions relating to the information available within our content, attempting to produce the highest amount of agreement within the field, and refining our information/beliefs via new or revised theories and instruments. In other words, a field that is driven by a successful paradigm will construct a coherent, working body of *research* for its membership to consider.

Third, a field driven by a successful paradigm will turn its attention to the ambiguities in the first two kinds of work. Knowing that 1) the

information describing our content and 2) our predictions or applications of that information may not always be so certain in all situations, a paradigm-driven field will continue to turn its attention to its very paradigm in order to fully articulate its underlying theory, given the changes in information from the other two kinds of work. Our underlying theory—as readers will see in chapter four—is a *Contextualist* Theory of Epistemic Justification, one that turns our attention again to our very content: the nature of rhetoric, moving us in a paradigm-driven *cycle of inquiry* —a Contextualist Research Paradigm for Rhetoric and Composition—that will, when successful, turn our attention beyond the kinds of research we *like*, to explore, more importantly, the kinds of research we and our students *need*.

But, for Kuhn, the adoption of a new, successful paradigm produces remarkable changes in a field:

> When . . . an individual or group first produces a synthesis able to attract most of the next generation's practitioners, the older schools gradually disappear. . . . But there are always some . . . who cling to one or another of the older views, and they are simply read out of the profession, which thereafter ignores their work. The new paradigm implies a new and more rigid definition of the field. Those unwilling or unable to accommodate their work to it must proceed in isolation or attach themselves to some other group. (18-19)

Embracing a Contextualist Research Paradigm for Rhetoric and Composition, which I hope has room for all members of our field, holds exciting possibilities for the future of our work.

To begin, this book's first chapter will focus on the context from which the remainder of *this* work emerges, with particular attention to current trends in publications and professional conferences in composition—especially those works and events that attempt to define our field. Of interest here also is the basic question of how a field defines itself in the first place, which must include a discussion of paradigms, paradigm shifts, and debates centered on what constitutes research and scholarship—and the language used either to organize or dismantle the boundaries of that same field.

Chapter two will continue to outline the historical and current issues in composition research, including a review of our field's earlier rejection of current-traditional rhetoric (to which we often draw parallels when discussing current research trends), a discussion of texts designed to help the composition researcher, a review of George Campbell's description of evidence, and a presentation of a simple mock study designed to teach some research concepts.

In chapter three, I will examine three other issues that we must address in the qualitative/quantitative debate: math avoidance and anxiety, feminist contributions to composition and arguments against traditional research, and a preference for storytelling as a genre more literary than the traditional research report. The mock study begun in chapter two will continue, in order to illustrate basic descriptive statistics.

Chapter four will examine seemingly incompatible research paradigms at an epistemological level and will examine the nature of "context." Of interest here is the artificial distinction composition scholars have made among three ways of knowing: expressivist, objectivist, and social-constructivist. To help dissolve the (false) boundaries among these theories of knowledge, I will present a Contextualist Theory of Epistemic Justification as a new template with which to view such theories and our research. This template, to those in rhetoric, will not be entirely new: it captures the essence of Aristotelian rhetoric, a tradition of rhetoric sensitive to context and to dialectic. This sensitivity to context, together with a new lens through which to see research contexts, will allow us to construct a Contextualist Research Paradigm for Rhetoric and Composition. The mock study will conclude with a demonstration of some concepts of inferential statistics.

In chapter five I will present a reprint of Eileen Oliver's (1995) study published in *RTE*, "The Writing Quality of Seventh, Ninth, and Eleventh Graders, and College Freshmen: Does Rhetorical Specification in Writing Prompts Make a Difference?" Dovetailing with her study, I will insert an interview with Eileen Oliver in which she comments on her work, describes the research process, and explains her decisions. Such a presentation will reveal to readers that narratives exist just below the surface of traditional quantitative

research and are not separate from it. This presentation will also demonstrate the Contextualist Research Paradigm at work.

Chapter six presents a second study, a pilot of my own, in which I examine the lore surrounding red ink in teaching composition. The purpose of the study in this chapter is to demonstrate quantitative comparisons between groups and statistical analysis. This study also serves as a test of much-accepted anecdotal evidence. The form in which it is presented (as a traditional research report *combined with* anecdotal evidence) suggests the possibility of lifting the underlying narrative of such research into the text in a new, less traditional form that composition might embrace as neither "quantitative" nor "qualitative," but as a multi-modal design that is simply necessary in the context of a particular research question, one explored with the Contextualist Research Paradigm in mind.

With chapters seven and eight I will conclude by speculating on the future of composition research and examining the need for a Contextualist Research Paradigm. I will suggest new goals for the field's researchers, and ask several questions about the future and politics of our research, the voices of our researchers, and our training in research design and statistics. I will propose that we teach the results of our research in our classrooms when we teach students how to write and that we construct a more accessible way to teach research design and statistics to our scholars of the future.

A Contextualist Research Paradigm for Rhetoric and Composition invites us to shift our focus—to the contexts in which we and our students need to explore fully the nature of composing, learning, and teaching. This focus will call us to attend to the contexts in which rhetorical issues and research issues converge, producing varied forms, many voices, and new knowledge, indeed reconstructing a discipline that will be simultaneously focused on its tasks, its knowledge-makers, and its students. Such a paradigm calls us to emerge from the trap of dichotomous thought and passionate debate that keeps us locked in the past and divided against ourselves—a calling through which we may embrace the freedom necessary to conduct the research our discipline so greatly needs.