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## Composing Research

Cindy Johaneck

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Cindy Johaneck



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# 1 COMPOSITION RESEARCH

## *Issues in Context*

[C]omposition studies is a field in a preparadigmatic state, a proto-science of a sort waiting for its first genuine exemplars. It is difficult to argue with this assertion; since we cannot predict the future, and for all we know a complete composition-studies paradigm may emerge tomorrow from completely unsuspected sources.

*Robert J. Connors, 1983*

The call for proposals for the 1998 NCTE Convention in Nashville, Tennessee, began with composition's newest and most popular tool: the anecdote. The call for proposals was focused on the local, the personal, and the emotional. In sharp contrast to previous calls that often placed a particular annual convention (and its theme) in a larger context—the overall field of teaching English, broad issues facing educators, or current social and political trends educators need to address—NCTE President-Elect Steiner instead told a story about “Maria”:

The semester had gone well, and I was giving the final exam to my senior American Literature class . . . . During the exam, Maria raised her hand. I walked over to her desk. She looked at me and asked, “Why do you teach us how to read around the word, but then test us on the word?” (1)

Investigating what she had learned from Maria's question, Steiner invited other professionals in our field to engage in similar inquiry, and while the Call for Proposals did not directly favor or debate the value of one kind of research over another, the call for teacher research through participant observation was clear as Steiner continued her reflection on Maria's story:

A teacher's role is unique. At times, as James Britton has taught us, teachers are in the role of participant, actively involved in the classroom

with students. At other times, teachers are in the role of spectator. . . . The 1998 Convention is a time for us to reflect upon classroom practices and upon our relationships as learners with our students. . . . Maria is not the only student who has taught me. (1)

Such attention to participant-observation and to reflection on our experiences drew, I'm sure, numerous insightful anecdotes and observations from our teaching at the November 1998 convention. Reflection and anecdotes are important to our understanding of what we do, but the NCTE announcement suggested what was not invited: quantitative studies, experimental research, or anything else that doesn't seem to fit a conference theme that highlights participant-observation and the personal anecdote:

Through the shifting roles of participant and spectator, teachers learn about their students and the dynamics of the classroom. Teachers also learn about themselves as professionals. . . . I invite you to share your moments of learning from or with your students at NCTE's 1998 National Convention. Please join us in Nashville, Tennessee, and place our mutual learning with students at the center of our time together. Join us in celebrating the continual learning and growing we enjoy as classroom teachers. (1)

A national announcement such as Steiner's (especially when added to the 1998 CCCC convention theme in Chicago, "Ideas, Historias, y Cuentos") indicates the degree to which our field has accepted certain forms of research—or forms we want to call research—and dialogue as a means of defining who we are professionally.

The simple dichotomy that divides what we commonly call "qualitative vs. quantitative" research has now been divided even further, it seems. Perhaps through our quest for more research, not only is "qualitative" disparaged, but systematic rigorous "qualitative" research seems to be less available, too, as we opt instead for the personalized anecdotal evidence we gain through experience. Rigorous ethnographies and case studies, though qualitative in nature, seem to be losing ground along with the quantitative—losing ground to the simpler, more diverse, more personal story or anecdote. Such reliance on the personal anecdote has contributed more to "lore" than to

“research,” two components of our knowledge-making that have always had an unfortunately strained relationship.

While I, too, will share several anecdotes in this work, in the hope and the belief that such anecdotes can help explain or contest larger concepts and can illuminate some of our work, “research” that shares *only* anecdotal evidence seems to have found a prominent place in our recent scholarship—and unfortunately so.

Recent collections of essays in composition studies reveal how strongly our field has embraced the anecdote, the story, as a means of and a form for our research. Several texts have been advertised primarily for their reflective approach and for their accessibility to readers; the following incomplete list offers just a few examples: *Pedagogy in the Age of Politics* (Sullivan & Qualley, 1994), *The Need for Story: Cultural Diversity in Classroom and Community* (Dyson & Genishi, 1994), *Learning in Small Moments: Life in an Urban Classroom* (Meier, 1997), *Stories from the Heart: Teachers and Students Researching their Literacy Lives* (Meyer, 1996), *Beginning in Retrospect: Writing and Reading a Teacher's Life* (Schmidt, 1996), *Narration as Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life* (Trimmer, 1997).

Potential problems of such collections, however, are noted by Jacobs (1997) in a review of Sullivan and Qualley's *Pedagogy in the Age of Politics* (1994). Jacobs argues that the focus on anecdotes and narratives from the individual voices of authors results in “diffuseness” and the impression that the authors seem “isolated rather than members of a social network” (464). For Jacobs, this lack of unity in *Pedagogy in the Age of Politics* came from the editors' inability to tie it all together or explain “the circumstances under which these papers came together” (464), and resulted in a highly inaccurate title that Jacobs argues applies to only one-fourth of the volume (465).

At the same time, others have been critical of the quality of non-anecdotal, more rigorous research in composition. When Stotsky (1997) stepped down as editor of *Research in the Teaching of English (RTE)*, she plainly remarked,

*RTE* has experienced a documented decline in recent years in the number of high quality manuscripts submitted. . . . I discovered at a

session for editors at the American Educational Research Association that this quality decline is affecting other mainstream research journals as well. (6)

To compensate, Stotsky explained, *RTE* published more reflective essays, “live debates,” and other inquiry that Stotsky admitted “helped *RTE* broaden its educational purpose. . . . [and] can serve a vital role in the professional development of English language arts teachers by informing them of the issues under discussion in the research community” (6). But such discussions, for *RTE*, had to be published due to a lack of high quality research (whether qualitative or quantitative in nature): “Necessity very much became the mother of serendipitous invention” (Stotsky, 1997, p. 6). Once *RTE* began to accept essays with a personalized bent, the full acceptance of the experiential through debate and anecdote was firmly in place, and our rejection of the quantitative was complete.

Wisely, and perhaps again out of necessity, the new editors of *RTE*, two issues after Stotsky stepped down, published an introductory explanation of what constitutes research, identifying a range of methods that are welcome in the journal (Smagorinsky & Smith, May 1997). One year later, however, in the May 1998 issue of *RTE*, Smagorinsky and Smith again discussed the criteria by which submissions would be accepted to the journal. The editors commented on the need for the “archival significance” of accepted articles—*RTE* is a place for public documents that chronicle the development of a community (121). The editors published three articles that they felt demonstrated what they meant by “significant” in the May 1998 issue of *RTE*. None of the articles presented quantitative data.

In short, the unfortunate rift between “quantitative” and “qualitative” research has not only resulted in a near-abandonment of research that seeks and analyzes numerical data, but it has also divided us further into the more private worlds of personal stories. While such stories can always help illuminate our work and give meaning to our theory, research, and practice, they, alone, cannot be the primary knowledge-making vehicle that defines our field. Given

current trends in our scholarship that seem to indicate such a direction, we must consider these (and other) questions:

1. Have we accepted anecdotes as a form of research so much as only to sacrifice other forms?
2. Why has composition gravitated toward the anecdote-as-research so quickly and so strongly?
3. Would our field be better defined by evidence that is personal, social, numerical, or a blend of these? *Can* we blend them?
4. What possible solutions are there to the quantitative/qualitative false dichotomy? What arguments would members of “both sides” listen to?
5. How would a solution change the future of composition research?

#### COMPOSITION IN A WORD: TRANSFORMATION

To examine research trends in any field is to study its processes of knowledge-making: what logic do we use to arrive at that knowledge? In what contexts do we believe the knowledge we feel we have? What texts comprise what we call our body of knowledge? That body of knowledge, of course, has boundaries that we create to determine what can and cannot be within its scope—boundaries that we choose to maintain or challenge, to accept or reject, to tighten or broaden, and, most importantly, to define and redefine (again and again) in the everchanging context(s) of the world(s) around us.

The long, multidisciplinary history of rhetoric and composition complicates such study of our own field. Our perception of our field and its history and research “in any given age depends on the organic interplay between the disposition of the discipline and the intellectual climate and social complexity of the times” (Johnson, 1991, pp. 6-7). Indeed, Johnson presented a compelling case in *Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric in North America* that “rhetorical theory and pedagogy have displayed a dynamic tendency toward responsive transformation” (7), often due to “shifting social and political conditions” (6). In other words, Johnson outlined rhetoric’s heightened sensitivity to context:

The most conspicuous characteristic in the history of rhetoric has been its responsiveness to the ever-changing nature of certain intellectual and cultural imperatives: 1) governing epistemological assumptions

regarding the relationships between thought, language, and communication; 2) dominant philosophical views of human nature and the nature of affective response to discourse; 3) conventional and institutional perceptions of appropriate modes of formal communication; and 4) the perceived role of the study and practice of rhetoric in the maintenance of social and political order. (4)

The above four imperatives have undoubtedly shaped and reshaped our field: how we teach, how we view ourselves, what and how we choose to research, and what forms of knowledge we deem valuable. Accordingly, we must take note of Johnson's choice of epigraphs preceding chapter one of *Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric*, epigraphs that illustrate an overwhelming transformation has already taken place in our research and in our view of knowledge:

This is a work of history in fictional form—that is, in personal perspective, which is the only kind of history that exists. (Joyce Carol Oates, *Them*)

The truth is, I have never written a story in my life that didn't have a very firm foundation in actual human experience—somebody else's experience quite often, but an experience that became my own by hearing the story, by witnessing the thing, by hearing just a word perhaps. (Katherine Ann Porter)

It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:  
 dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,  
 drawn from the cold hard mouth  
 of the world, derived from the rocky breast  
 forever, flowing and drawn, and since  
 our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

(Elizabeth Bishop, "At the Fishhouses")

This view of knowledge—personal, experiential, flowing, dark, free, and expressive—has recently and greatly transformed the research of our field. As epigraphs to Johnson's first chapter in a book on nineteenth century rhetoric, the statements above serve to guide readers as they proceed: to frame Johnson's own beliefs about the field, to explain her approach to historical inquiry, to align her, perhaps, with other (women) writers/poets, and to assert what kinds of knowledge our field has ultimately come to value most.

Such knowledge seems best expressed through narratives and poetry rather than scientific reports, through a story rather than data analysis, through the emotional more than the logical, through the specifics of experience instead of the generalizations of probability. The recent “transformation” which Johnson used to frame her text has, indeed, reframed the contexts in which we now do research and publish our work—a new context that has produced research that highlights the personal, the local, the narrative.

A responsive transformation such as this has had, on the one hand, some positive effects: composition has found itself in the more comfortable world of the social, personal, anthropological, political, and literary arenas that have always been of interest to many of us more than the scientific or mathematical; those now being trained as writing teachers and tutors will see more readily than teachers 50 years ago that we teach not so much an impersonal subject, but students alive with personal knowledge they bring to their writing and reading; as writers ourselves, we seem to gain more freedom to contribute to a growing body of knowledge presented in a wider range of scholarship, including the creative; and this scholarship is more accessible to most of us, more understandable—we’re in this field, after all, because we’ve always loved to read “that kind of stuff.”

For all we have gained through such a transformation, however, what might we have lost? New trends in our research have taken hold strongly enough to dramatically reduce the same “responsiveness” and “dynamic tendency” for which Johnson had once praised our field: a stronger commitment to one kind of knowledge has made us dangerously less responsive to other kinds and, therefore, less dynamic in our quest to define our field. Peter Elbow’s *What is English?* (1990) is the clearest example:

“What is English?” The title is not intended as a question I can answer with my book, not a slow lob that I can try to hit for a home run. The title is my answer, my summing up, my picture of the profession. This book is trying to paint a picture of a profession that cannot define what it is. (v)

Elbow did not pretend to answer the question in his title; instead, he presented his personal reflections on the 1987 English Coalition



Conference, joined by interludes of letters, reflections, stories, and position statements written by conference participants. This book (a picture of a “profession that cannot define what it is”) becomes, then, a collage of narratives, experiences—in short, a portrait of a field based on knowledge that is (like the knowledge valued in Johnson’s epigraphs) personal, experiential, flowing, dark, free, and expressive. Teachers at the conference shared stories about triumphs and failures with their students, stories about poor (and sometimes violent) conditions in which they teach, questions and reflections about what they did and did not get out of the conference, memories of their own teachers.

By presenting primarily this kind of knowledge, Elbow, while claiming not to define the field, presented a model, perhaps, of what he saw as the best method for getting us there—an anecdotal approach to clarifying our boundaries—and the kind of knowledge to which we should assign the highest value.

I would not be exaggerating if I said, “I *love* Elbow’s book!” After all, I, too, am in this field because I like to read “that kind of stuff.” Elbow makes me think. He asks hard questions. He makes me laugh. I think he makes us all laugh, especially at ourselves. Every field needs a writer who does those things.

But every field needs more than that, too.

There are, after all, questions that Elbow couldn’t ask (or offer as an “answer”), and there are parts of our field he couldn’t define (even if he had tried) because of the method he chose for constructing that picture of the field in the first place. While he raised fascinating questions and explored interesting theories, these questions and theories (and the personal, individual stories through which they were raised) cannot help us determine the scope of certain problems he saw in the field (such as how we assign grades); they cannot help us understand the full effectiveness of certain teaching methods; they cannot allow us to compare classroom-wide changes after a school reduces class sizes or installs computers or after a teacher alters her view of testing.

For example, in one of Elbow’s interludes, a teacher changed her 8th grade literature tests when a student—and, once, the student’s mother—had epileptic seizures after taking those tests. This teacher

realized that her exams taxed the memory too greatly and did not allow for investigation or application of principles (higher-order thinking skills, in other words), so she changed the tests to include new features, more essays, and some take-home options. She confirmed through observation that the epileptic student performed far better on the new tests, but she offered no report on whether students who had already performed well were getting more out of the new tests, too (258-259). Here we recognize a teacher who feels she made a change for the better. We have every reason to believe that one student is better off, and we might guess that others are, too. But that's all we can do: guess.

In *What is English?* Elbow presented the “kind of stuff” that is moving. It’s “that kind of stuff” that inspires me to stay in this field where everyone seems to learn so much, so much of the time. But it’s that kind of guessing (at “dark knowledge”) that dangerously draws us further from the kind of research that could shed more light—if only we let it. After all, to allow such “knowledge” to remain dark is, in the end, to accept incomplete knowledge.

To illuminate the assumption that a change for the better for one student is a change for the better for all, the above teacher could have conducted a fascinating study right in her own classroom: to compare student learning of (and, perhaps, attitudes toward) literature before and after her new tests, to explore her test as not so much a test but as another teaching tool, to assess the value of her classroom after the change, perhaps even in comparison to other classrooms.

But such a study takes time and, worse, requires quantifying and analyzing data (numbers, in other words), and Elbow warned us in this book that any reduction of anything to a single number is “untrustworthy” (251). Never mind that Elbow also warned us in the beginning of the same book that his reflections were biased and that he, like Gulliver, was a less-than-reliable narrator (vi). The current climate of our field (one of new favoritism toward anecdotal forms of research) has produced a battle for trustworthiness between a number and a narrative. And the narrative clearly wins—not because it necessarily offers more (or more accurate) information than the other, but because the narrative offers one *kind* of information that we clearly value more.

After all, *that* is English.

But not all narratives and personal experiences are as easily received in composition as those in Elbow's book. Indeed, not one of Elbow's narrative interludes began with "I conducted a study once" or "I was thinking about an experiment I read." When I attend professional conferences in composition, most often on writing centers, and share some of my own narratives, the experiences I now bring to this work, they are often pointed out as "unpopular to say." For example, as an undergraduate, I majored in composition and cognitive psychology. While pursuing these majors, I participated in an undergraduate experimental psychology research group. I once conducted and presented a study on attitudinal similarity and image maintenance between writers and evaluators of writing. I enjoy the challenge of studying statistics and experimental research designs and I wanted to write a dissertation on related issues. My colleagues' responses to these "stories" of mine have ranged from suggesting I'm in the wrong field, to incredulous remarks ("are you serious?") to warnings not to ruin my career, to a simple uncomprehending blink or two.

To me, the defensiveness in these reactions was confusing. My interest in composition began as a peer tutor in a writing center, when I was a sophomore in 1986, about to begin my major in English with an emphasis in composition. At the time, majoring in both English and cognitive and experimental psychology, my studies in these two different areas made a lot of sense to me. When I was tutoring writing, for example, I often kept in mind a principle of human memory from cognitive psychology called the "serial position effect," a notion based on years of research on memory that suggests we remember best what we see last, we remember second best what we see first, and we remember the least the stuff in the middle. Regardless of what direction my tutorials took, I always tried to engage the writers with whom I worked in a summary of what had just happened—a collaborative summary at the *end* of the tutorial, a tutorial strategy based on theories of collaborative learning (as composition had emphasized to me) *and* on principles of cognitive psychology (as research had emphasized). When writers struggled with organization—or with introductions and conclusions—the "serial

position effect” was also useful and gave us another language with which to talk about readers and *their* memories and how the writer can help work the brains, so to speak, of their audience.

Studies in social cognition, especially in attribution theory, gave me a lens—not the only lens, of course, but an important one—with which to see a writer’s level of confidence, how a writer measured his or her success. Attribution theorists often attempt to answer the question “to what do we attribute our success, our failure, our beliefs, our performance in varied contexts?” Of special interest are attributions to external factors (such as luck or help) vs. internal factors (such as effort or intelligence or ability). I was often struck by the number of students—often those who lacked confidence in their ability—who attributed success to *my help*, rather than to their own effort or intelligence. I was especially struck by the students who attributed success to *luck*, an external factor even more out of their control—or my control as their tutor, for that matter.

Psychologists have found many relationships between attributions to external, uncontrollable factors for success and issues of low self-esteem, low-to-medium success in careers, and poor self-image (especially among women). While tutoring, I would use attribution cues from students—cues that would help me listen for when they needed help seeing the importance of their effort, their ability, the time spent on drafting, their motivation to succeed, their talent and strengths—hoping they would transfer their attributions for their success from others to themselves, so they would become more independent writers, more confident and more proud of their work.

While I often applied what I had learned in my psychology major to my work as a writing center tutor, application often worked in reverse as well. My training as a writing consultant was important to my participation and my learning in our experimental psychology research group. Most of our meetings focused on helping someone design a study. Questions I learned to ask as a writing tutor were important to me and my fellow researchers: questions that tried to determine what the researcher wanted to know, why it was important to know it, and how best to arrive at some answers—questions and guidance that, as a writing tutor, I used all the time in a writing center. Often, my

colleagues in the research group would ask me (because I was the only “English person” in their group) for my help wording their arguments, finding the best mode of argumentation based on their data, finding the clearest language with which to express their statistical analyses.

For me, there were all sorts of connections between studies in cognition and tutoring writing, between experimental designs and how we think through a tutorial, between theories of psychology and theories of reading and writing. But when I got to graduate school and began to focus my studies on composition and rhetoric (and writing centers in particular), I would learn a disturbing truth: (some of) the most prominent scholars in composition and rhetoric and writing centers argue that these two worlds—one world of the cognitive, the experimental, the psychologist, and the other world of the composition specialist, literacy theorist, writing teacher and tutor—were not connected at all. (see chapter two)

In my own graduate courses in composition, for example, research methods considered to be more “naturalistic” were often favored over those more “scientific”—favored in student projects, in professors’ selections of reading materials, and in course content. In these courses, language we often associate with traditional research was also under fire as other political arenas within composition (especially in basic writing and writing centers) have been ablaze with criticism for terms like “standard,” “control,” “marginal,” “manipulation,” and other terms central to an understanding of statistics. And the study and use of statistics, of course, require numbers—numbers that many who are formally trained in a literary tradition find confusing and useless, if not hateful and (for Elbow) “untrustworthy.”

#### FIELD-BUILDING IN A POSTMODERN AGE

Not knowing what evidence to “trust” is natural for any field in a world we now call “postmodern”—but lack of trust seems not only natural but necessary for a field born in part *because* of that world. For Phelps (1988),

The postmodern world is marked by themes of loss, illusion, instability, marginality, decentering, finitude. . . . Across the disciplines, all of the

old realities are in doubt, placed under radical critiques—critiques that challenge reason, consciousness, knowledge, meaning, communication, freedom. . . . These assaults destroy absolutes and leave us in fear of an ultimate meaninglessness that will paralyze action and thought. (5)

Phelps praised the postmodern consciousness for its attack on scientism—science’s belief in its own methods, proof, knowledge—and for questioning the knowledge that scientism has upheld as “permanently valid” and with “absolute authority” (9). In Foucault’s (1972) terms, a whole “field of questions” has emerged, seeking “discontinuity (threshold, rupture, break, mutation, transformation)” (5-6).

The modern version of composition studies—though grounded in a long-standing rhetorical tradition—emerged amid such chaos—in the context of a rupture, a transformation, a mutation, if you will, called the “literacy crisis” of the mid-1970s (Harkin & Schilb, 1991). Sommers (1979) had argued that our field lacked an articulated theory at that time *because* of the chaotic response to the literacy crisis, a response that resulted in numerous teaching methods developed without the support of a theory of how students learn.

By 1991, Harkin and Schilb asserted that “composition studies has now become a fully authorized academic field and a site of inquiry in its own right” (3). However, their introduction to *Contending with Words* remained alive with, well, contending words: “tensions,” “resistant,” “crisis,” “refuse,” “interrogate.” And they didn’t quite say *how* this new field became fully authorized, though it seems to me that such a fully authorized field wouldn’t need so much contending, wouldn’t need to point out that contributors to the volume were those who “refuse to act as the ‘window washers of the academy’” (5). Indeed, the culture into which composition was born was one of change, of dissolving boundaries, or, for Phelps, “composition comes to maturity at just the moment when discourse (especially writing) and its interpretation stand at the epicenter of a great change, a fundamental crisis in human consciousness” (4).

Placed “at the epicenter of a great change,” then, the field has had to construct its own boundaries in a culture that had just destroyed

the old ways of boundary-making and had begun to question knowledge in a new way.

For Hairston (1982), this change was called a “paradigm shift,” based on the work of Kuhn (1970). But, in Connors’s (1983) reading of Kuhn, our field did not have a paradigm from which to shift in the first place, and was or is, therefore, preparadigmatic, with preparadigmatic elements competing against each other—possibly as a result of our field’s history, which Connors called “chaotic, anti-empirical, confused, and at times mindless” (18). In Connors’s review of composition scholars’ borrowing from Kuhn, he noted that all of those scholars—those who have seen a paradigm shift and those who have argued the field is preparadigmatic—were nevertheless “united in the belief that composition studies can attain a Kuhnian scientific paradigm” of some sort (5).

Regardless of how Kuhn has been applied to composition studies, the quest for a paradigm—for defining boundaries—has been made clear. Currently, composition is defined by a confusing array of ideas. On the one hand, some have said current-traditional rhetoric stemmed from the nineteenth century, and, later, changed, suggesting the widely-accepted notion that our field has, indeed, experienced a paradigm shift of sorts. On the other hand, those who argue that composition studies emerged in the 1970s during the “literacy crisis” suggest that the field possibly emerged because of that paradigm shift, suggesting that the earlier paradigm was quite possibly a very different field, not our own field as we now know it. Currently, the rapid rise of anecdotal evidence, story-telling, and qualitative research, together with a few remaining traditional studies, has multiplied the ways in which the field can define itself. For Kuhn (1970), such a wide range of evidence and its accompanying, competing theories suggests a preparadigmatic state:

In the absence of a paradigm or some candidate for a paradigm, all of the facts that could possibly pertain to the development of a given science are likely to seem equally relevant. As a result, early fact-gathering is a far more nearly random activity than the one that subsequent scientific development makes familiar. Furthermore, in the absence of a reason for

seeking some particular form of more recondite information, early fact-gathering is usually restricted to the wealth of data that lie ready to hand. The resulting pool of facts contains those accessible to casual observation and experiment, together with some of the more esoteric data retrievable from established crafts. (15)

I agree with Connors that composition was preparadigmatic in 1983. If it is possible for a field to become “more preparadigmatic” as time goes on, composition seems to have done so. In Charney’s (1996) words, our recent reliance on individual, personal studies has produced “a broad shallow array of information, in which one study may touch loosely on another but in which no deep or complex networks of inferences and hypotheses are forged or tested” (590). In the absence of a paradigm, as Kuhn noted, our frequent use of random activity and casual observations via the anecdote, together with our struggle to *make* varied kinds of evidence equal to each other, has broadened the scope of our inquiry, certainly in some valuable ways; but such diverse activity has also, unwittingly perhaps, removed the very thing many of our scholars have been searching for: a definition of our field, a paradigm, sensible boundaries in which to contain a seemingly chaotic volume of scholarship.

If we believe that our field emerged in the context of what others have described as a chaotic state, a whirlwind of debate about knowledge, paradigms, and history, it is no wonder that composition has now gravitated toward the heavy use of the personal, individual, anecdotal evidence now seen in much of our scholarship. Perhaps storytelling and experience-sharing allows us a means to join the critique of scientism, or perhaps it binds us to the only part of our knowledge that we believe is still certain and accessible—our personal experience. Perhaps story telling allows us the chance to start over—a new paradigm of sorts that paradoxically favors the absence of one.

Such a shift, for Ward (1995), is reminiscent of Snow’s (1965) discussion of the clash of “Two Cultures”—a gap between the sciences and humanities that Snow tried to close even though he saw the gulf as irreconcilable (4-5). In spite of some criticism that Snow’s divisions were too simplistic, Ward (1995) has asserted that such a gulf is



not only evident, but has actually widened at the close of the twentieth century, dividing not only fields, but subfields and colleagues:

Often in loosely knit and divisive fields, like literary criticism, philosophy, and sociology, the collective representation of the field itself has not been completely settled and is, therefore, up for grabs. . . . In these settings, cliques and subgroups with competing truth claims and ideologies are likely to exist. (9)

For those fields that reject scientism as a means of organizing themselves, to what do they turn? For Ward, the debate about what constitutes knowledge—what research and inquiry should define a field—is rarely about knowledge itself so much as it is about “ongoing organizational and political struggles” (4). Composition is currently constructing, then, not a Kuhnian scientific paradigm, but what Ward called an “organizational myth”—a “banner or totem around which a social group is internally organizing itself and under which a new political assault on the scientific establishment is being made” (1). Our own “new political assault” advances under the “banner” of the story or anecdote.

Given our field’s recent history of doubting traditional research, our current interest in research methods other than the quantitative, our distaste for statistics, and our need to maintain all forms of research in our scholarship, the composition field needs a more accessible analysis of the available research methods and, especially, of the contexts in which we use them. A new look at *research in context* will enable us to understand the potential of diverse research forms, to realize that numbers indeed may tell a story, to accept the terminology of scientific inquiry on its own terms, and to engage in the pleasure of asking wide-ranging questions and seeking their answers.

Such an analysis addresses the nature of research paradigms, the effects of rapid changes in those paradigms, and the power of research to define a field. Scholars in our field currently engage in passionate, sometimes defensive, debates about just those issues, posing arguments and establishing preferences, though unfortunately creating dichotomous language that further divides those same scholars. To achieve common ground, we must avoid the artificial

dichotomy (and divisive language) that has naturally and unfortunately emerged from discussions of our research. Others have put forth excellent discussion in an attempt to collapse this dichotomy (Charney, 1996; Hillocks, 1992; Schriver, 1989; Kirsch, 1992) but could do so only through the same dichotomous language and, therefore, have not yet succeeded..

Some of the following terms are central to the debate. A list of definitions for these terms helps condense the conflicts in our field to a concise space—a space in which the language we use to keep ourselves apart is highlighted. Labels we place on our research (and researchers), with their diverse connotations, are, for some, accusations rather than concepts worth defining. Defining such concepts, however, provides a framework in which disputing parties might come together and embrace some of this same divisive language in order to start a discussion toward collapsing the dichotomy from which such language emerges. In the following list, I adopt current usage of some terms as they have appeared in composition scholarship; for other terms, I establish more useful boundaries:

1. *Research*: While many inquiries constitute “research” (I agree, for example, with Miller’s (1992) argument that writing about theory can be understood as a form of research), my use of the term in this project is more narrow, focusing on inquiry guided by specific research questions actively explored by a discernible method, such as experiment, interview, survey, ethnography, or case study. Some of the following terms further define different kinds of research as perceived by our field.
2. *Scientific Inquiry/Methods*: I am using “scientific” to describe research methods that engage in hypothesis-testing and employ statistical analyses of data gathered from measurements of identified, controlled variables within the research context. Purposes for such inquiry include description, inference, prediction, and/or explanation as guided by the question being explored in the research context.
3. *Empirical*: For some in composition, empiricism is related to scientism or to extreme positivism (for example, Phelps, 1988). Its relation to the scientific method, to methods of systematic testing and observation (Kerlinger, 1986, pp. 4-5), quite possibly causes this interpretation.

However, a more accurate definition can be found in *Reading Empirical Research Studies: The Rhetoric of Research*. Hayes et al. (1992) included as examples of empirical research in composition “case studies, naturalistic observation, surveys, protocol studies, correlational studies, experiments, historical studies” (5).

4. *Naturalistic Inquiry/Methods*: “Naturalistic” refers to those research methods that seek to describe and/or narrate events, people, phenomena, and experiences as completely as possible by including all variables gained through dialogue and/or observation. Politics of research in composition are such that “naturalistic” is often used in contrast to (and to highlight) “artificial” scientific inquiry; while I object to such distinctions, I will adopt the terms as currently used.
5. *Narrative*: While literary theorists have proposed elaborate definitions of this term, narrative in composition research is synonymous with other terms, such as “anecdote” and “story” or with the kinds of texts that offer full descriptions of events, such as ethnographies and case studies. For composition, then, narrative seems to describe any text that presents a temporal “telling” of some event(s) or phenomenon, a telling that will often have a “personal voice” or personal involvement on the part of the writer. I adopt this use of the term throughout this text.
6. *Positivism*: A view of knowledge “characterized . . . by the use of mathematics, logic, observation, experimentation, and control” such that the “scientific method is the only source of correct knowledge about reality” (Angeles, 1992, pp. 234-235). While this extreme view of positivism does not exist in quite this form in our field, those who define themselves through “humanism” in contrast have argued as if it does.
7. *Humanism*: In composition research debates, humanism is defined in sharp contrast to positivism and is further defined by humanities training, mostly in literary studies. From a research point of view, humanism rejects methods that involve mathematics and that attempt to control variables, preferring instead methods that involve, for example, dialogue and observation in natural settings through ethnography, case studies, and interviews.
8. *Qualitative vs. Quantitative Research*: This distinction is often made in our scholarship, producing a false dichotomy between, for example, a case study as a qualitative work with only descriptive value, lacking quantitative data, and an experiment as a quantitative work with only

numerical analysis, lacking descriptive qualities. I try to avoid these stereotypes except where already used by composition researchers cited in this work.

9. *Objective vs. Subjective Research*: This distinction, too, is made in composition research, and I use these terms only as they appear in our scholarship; otherwise, I avoid perpetuating this distinction as a further division among researchers.

#### STARTING POINTS AND ASSERTIONS

Such divided language and passions concerning how research is conducted in composition suggest the need for a thorough examination of our research processes and the arguments we construct to defend our preferences for constructing our field. Indeed, Connors (1983) accurately argued, “as a research discipline we tend to flail about” (10).

This book is a response to that “flailing about,” and it grows out of my own concern for our growing unwillingness to listen to each other and to create an inclusive research paradigm. While I would never dare suggest that such a work will “cure” all flailing about, I sincerely hope that it helps us (at the very least) flail about less often and (even more importantly) understand why we flail about at all and (most importantly) helps us find new ways to appreciate and engage in not just the kinds of research we like, but also the kinds of research we need.

Many obstacles interfere with this goal, I think. Indeed, for me and for this work, Elbow (1990) captured the most difficult obstacle of all in *What is English?* when he argued that the field cannot define what it is in the first place. Yet, to hold steady, for the moment, the current politics of composition research and the historical forces that have shaped current debates among researchers, the following assertions will guide the remainder of this work:

1. Contemporary composition theorists have erroneously blamed a scientific epistemology for the failed current-traditional paradigm.
2. The current explosion of interest in a social-constructivist epistemology and its accompanying research methods has further shifted

- researchers' attentions and questions away from contexts that could benefit from scientific inquiry.
3. Shifting away from scientific inquiry has resulted in newly accepted modes of research in composition that are valuable for answering certain kinds of questions in certain contexts.
  4. Formal training in the humanities has not prepared composition specialists for scientific investigations, has constructed a body of knowledge seemingly foreign to and separate from the scientific, and has developed an axiology in which controlled, scientific inquiry is less valued.
  5. Most texts that seek to guide researchers in composition are inadequate in their explanations of research design, in their choice of sample studies, and in their treatment of statistics.
  6. All research methods are limited in the kinds of questions they can answer and depend on the contexts in which those questions are asked; similarly, all research methods have value within certain ranges of research contexts and questions.

In summary, the goal of *Composing Research* is to collapse the qualitative/quantitative dichotomy in composition research and to construct instead a Contextualist Research Paradigm for Rhetoric and Composition—one that focuses our attention not on form or politics, but on the processes of research that naturally produce varied forms in the varied research contexts we encounter in our work.