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Composing Research

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6 A CONTEXTUALIST RESEARCH PARADIGM

A Demonstration

In the most traditional form, research reports often exclude personal experience or even the use of first person, resulting in texts that sometimes sound awkward (“the authors conclude . . .”) or impersonal and a-contextual (“the literature has failed to show . . .”). Our own sensitivity to context in composition studies has guided the perception that such traditional reports are, therefore, insensitive to context. As shown in chapter five, this is not the case, as Oliver articulated answers to most of the questions in the Contextualist Research Paradigm Matrix. However, the appearance of the traditional report is a part of the perceived problem. While I contend that numerical evidence is never stripped of the context of personal observations, intuition, and experience, the concise manner in which numerical evidence is often presented in traditional reports often creates, for readers unfamiliar with or lacking training in traditional reports, the illusion that it is.

Choosing such a traditional form (and the voice that accompanies it) is understandable and appropriate in several contexts. In the context of Oliver’s study, for example, she needed to share a lengthy literature review, articulate complicated data and data analyses, and discuss practical applications of the study—elements necessary for a persuasive and informative piece given the nature of her study. To add more personal anecdotes or to construct a personal voice would have taken too much space and would have distracted readers’ attention from other, more important issues at *that* moment, in *that* context. Regardless of the reasons for Oliver’s rhetorical decisions, however, she made each decision appropriately in the context of her work.

In other contexts, however, a blend of styles would be appropriate, too. In this chapter, I will present another study, but this pilot study

will blend a “narrative” with the traditional-looking text, creating an alternative form for reporting research that composition scholars might find more attractive and readable if they decide the context warrants such a blended form. This blended form makes the context for the project more visible and more readily perceived by its very appearance and its use of personal voice, experience, and anecdotes—a context more visible to the untrained eye, in contrast to the need for training to understand the full context of a more traditional report. The numerical data presented in this pilot study, then, is more obviously “contextualized” within the narration of the process and anecdotes that express the curiosity that guided the study. At the same time, I do not intend to recommend this form as the *best* alternative for all studies, for to do so would, once again, ignore context.

While this blend of styles is one of the purposes of the following study, it meets a second purpose as well: the following study tests one small piece of our commonly accepted lore by asking, “Is red ink all that bad?” What would happen if we experimented by using red ink with some students and another color with other students? What would students then say about that ink color when we ask them how it makes them feel? How true is our lore? Driven by my own memory of red ink on my own papers as a student (and the encouragement I felt from my teachers), I conducted an experiment that tried to assess students’ feelings about red ink. For me, there was a discrepancy between my own memories, experiences, and intuition and the oral and written lore that criticizes the use of red ink in our field. Thus, in Annis’s terms, my own “believer’s level of understanding” conflicted with the beliefs about an “issue” held by the “appropriate objector group.”

The Contextualist Research Paradigm presented in chapter four is at work here. For example, readers will notice that the dominant voice is, first, a personal one, as I recall experiences that have framed my view of red ink. Then, the voice becomes a critical one, questioning and commenting on some available literature. As I reveal my methods and data, my voice continues to narrate and describe events, but it treats the data accurately in traditional ways when needed. Finally, my tone turns argumentative in the discussion section but returns to the

Figure 6.1

*A Contextualist Paradigm for Rhetoric and Composition:
Responses in Context of Red Ink / Blue Ink Study*

		Rhetorical Issues		
		<i>The Social (Audience)</i>	<i>The Personal (Researcher)</i>	<i>The Factual (Evidence)</i>
Research Issues	Question / Issue	I imagine readers who either believe red ink lore or have questioned it themselves; teachers, tutors, myself, the field	I'm curious because avoidance of red ink doesn't address larger issues. As a student, I didn't perceive red as negative. My studies in cognition suggest that red might be effective for attracting students' attention.	Question should be worded for hypothesis testing to guide the experiment. Ethical issues? I'm confident students will not be pained by the red pen.
	Purpose	My research will benefit mostly teachers, by examining lore. It will help students if we think about our commenting styles differently.	This study might be the first of its kind. Other literature refers to red ink casually—assumptions, not “tests” or full examination.	I need evidence that is both numerical and anecdotal—to measure the anecdotal against the numerical.
	Method(s)	Most others, in print and in conversation seem to accept the lore of red ink as a punishing element in a teacher's comments or discuss red ink as something from our past.	I can use my own classes and find another teacher willing to participate. I can design my own instrument and analyze my own data. Weaknesses: what if the other teacher is too different? I won't have a large group of subjects.	Data readily available: my experience and observations. Data to be gathered: Students' response to survey. Available literature will help outline the lore.
	Publication	To question lore, the final report should include lore, but go beyond that. Start with lore, then numerical data.	I want to be perceived as serious but playful—a calm easy voice. Intro: questioning/calm; Methods: accurate / friendly; Discussion: argumentative and questioning; Conclusion: return to questioning calm.	My data is interesting: few significant differences, but red received higher average for all but one item. In this context, it's enough evidence to rethink lore but not enough to claim that students prefer red.

personal inquisitive voice with which I started. Therefore, I decided to adopt not just one voice, but several, as needed for the larger context of this study and in the smaller and different sections of the report. Figure 6.1 shows the Contextualist Research Paradigm matrix with my answers to each set of questions proposed in the original matrix (see chapter four).

Certainly, I made more decisions than I can possibly show in this space, but I hope that readers will see the intersection of the rhetorical and research issues that formed the context in which I conducted and shared the study and how these decisions appear in the final product of the study below. Further, I did not keep track of the order in which I encountered these decisions. The process of making these decisions was much messier than the matrix might suggest, and readers should be aware that the matrix simply shows *which* decisions I made, not at what time or in what order.

Undoubtedly, critics of traditional research models have argued that such research serves the trivial or obvious; here, a study about red ink might seem, at first, trivial. Yet this study is designed as a demonstration beginners might find instructive, and it attempts to answer a question that pervades our lore and sometimes our literature. Why do we subscribe to the notion that red ink is always negative? Could data gathered from classroom research help us rethink that lore?

RED INK / BLUE INK: DOES IT REALLY MATTER WHAT WRITING TEACHERS USE?¹

When I think of red, I think of many things: the red oversized sweater that draws compliments from friends and students every time I wear it; that very special Valentine I hope to get one day; the funny family story about my police-officer grandfather not allowing my mother to own red shoes because “every prostitute on Washington Street” did, too; a man I once dated who looked especially handsome in red and less so in other colors; the single red rose I carried in my youngest sister’s wedding; the comments and encouragement (in red ink) from several wonderful teachers who made me, too, want to be a teacher someday.

Red comments on my papers and tests did, in fact, “scream” as we think they do. They yelled, “this is *important!*” and “here’s an error to correct in the future”—screaming and yelling that drew my attention, that motivated me, that focused my energy on working harder, becoming stronger. But teachers also had positive things to say, and I don’t recall any of them switching ink color to do so. Still in red, their positive comments would shout: “You’re terrific!” and “I like your writing!” and, on occasion, a “Hallelujah!” or two.

Later, when my training in composition began in a writing center, I learned more narrow meanings for red ink. Typical of lore, my indoctrination into the dangers of red ink was mostly oral—listening to professors, attending conferences, and reinforcing the notion in hallway chatter. Soon, I, too, associated red ink with “old-fashioned” pedagogies, the kind that writing centers and new-paradigm teachers would stay far away from. Teachers who bled all over student papers were a part of the problem that writing tutors were there to correct, to provide salvation for the victims—the students. Numerous *Tutors’ Columns* in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* reinforced the horrors of red ink.

In one *Tutors’ Column*, “Leggo My Ego,” Babcock (1995) related the euphoric rush of power he felt when he was first hired as a tutor, including lofty images/fantasies of power and glory: “I, cackling my rapture, pinned endless stacks of bad term papers to dart boards with flying red pencils” (10). In the end, Babcock relinquished such notions of power in favor of “tutor speak.”

In the Spring of 1997, one day I had a short break from my duties as a faculty tutor in a writing center, so I took the opportunity to grade a couple of last-minute papers for a class I would teach that afternoon. Much to the horror of two tutors on duty at the time, I used the only pen I had in my purse: red. Their questions, in short, were filled with dismay and centered on the notion that someone like me (i.e., someone in a doctoral program in composition at the time, someone in writing centers,

someone who should be well-versed in composition theory) would use, of all things, a red pen. They asked me everything but “Where have you *been?!?*”

We cannot deny that red ink is still a part of our educational framework, our image. Even in a search for the phrase “red pen(s)” on the World Wide Web via AltaVista, dozens of websites (too many to count, really) provide lists of school supplies for elementary and middle school children—including the red pens necessary for peer review of written texts. Indeed, red is still frequently used by editors, even though our negative image of red evolved to the point that writing teachers now avoid it.

Red ink with all its ills has become such a standard part of our lore, that when it is mentioned in our scholarship, these references are often casual references in nature, as if readers will automatically know what we mean. Harkin (1991), in fact, used red ink as a descriptive element of what lore is in the first place:

Lore comprises the rituals of our profession, like teaching the modes, sitting in a circle, assigning double-entry notebooks, using a red pen, forming peer-group workshops. (125)

In Furnish's (1995) plea for writing teachers to examine their hatred of grading writing, one of Furnish's assumptions is that writing teachers' frustrations are related to their writing too much—“they use more red ink than they should if both teacher and student are to keep things in perspective” (493) (see also Sommers, 1982)—but the red pen results also in the scarlet-letter shame that students must wear:

Most teachers mark the writing they grade by using the proverbial red ink to show students that writing is fraught with the peril of costly or shameful error. (493)

The association we have with error (and, therefore, with shame) is commonly seen. Hawisher and Selfe (1991), in a review of technology in the composition classroom, warned us

against using technology to move us forward only in the same old, bad ways of the old paradigm:

We need to talk about the dangers of instructors who use computers to deliver drill-and-practice exercises to students or of instructors who promote the use of style analyzers to underscore student errors more effectively than they did five years ago with red pens. (61)

For Gage (1986), red ink was also associated with error, especially in creating students' superstitions that good writing means good grammar:

For such students, grammar is a gigantic, invisible mine field through which they must navigate or be destroyed—when they least expect it—by red ink. They have often suffered this sort of injury . . . (16)

Gage was not alone in constructing a violent image for red ink in the composition classroom. For others, the red pen is not only associated with grammar or error, but is also an eerie symptom of teachers' undemocratic power and authority in the classroom—an authority that is, academically speaking, violent. For Briggs and Pailliotet (1997), such violence comes from the authority asserted by “those uninformed and dangerous teachers who churned out bloodied texts, who scorned their students, who abused the power vested in them by the institution” (57).

This is war, it seems. Mine fields, blood, destruction, and casualties—all brought on by the only pen that is truly mightier than the sword: that red one. For Briggs and Pailliotet, however, teachers generally seem to be losing the war, and since we are already dubbed “dangerous,” it seems natural to become “armed” as well:

In a system that doesn't allow high school teachers the same opportunities to use the bathroom as students, who can fault teachers for asserting their power with the red pen? (57)

Power, glory, shame, and violence: Can one ink color really do all that? As our understanding of assessment improves, do

our students feel more shame with one color than with another? The oral and written lore of red ink—pervasive in our field—is clear. Given my own experiences, however, I have to question: Is it accurate?

THE STUDY

The following pilot study sought to determine the effects of red ink on students' perceptions of teacher comments. In short, I was curious: do students respond negatively to red ink if teachers use red ink? The following study compares blue and red ink in basic writing courses in hopes of confirming or contesting the lore of red ink in our profession.

If our lore "holds true," the students subjected to the pain of red ink in this study should have felt that teachers who used red ink were unfair, harsh, negative, authoritative. I would expect students to perhaps become fearful of those comments and, by extension, of the teacher. But at the same time, I intuitively hypothesized that red ink *wouldn't* matter. If the lore indeed remained true, students should prefer blue ink over red, but I instead predicted no difference between students' responses to red vs. blue ink.

What I learned, however, surprised me.

METHOD

Subjects

In the Fall of 1997, I asked my friend and colleague, Greg Siering, to participate in this study with me. First, I knew that Greg was teaching two sections of basic writing at the same times my two sections of basic writing were held. Second, I wanted the other teacher to be male, to counterbalance for gender effects. Further, Greg and I are approximately the same age, were ABD in Ball State's doctoral program in composition, and were teaching the 50-minute courses not only at the same time (1:00 and 3:00, MWF) but in the same building. As a general rule, neither of us used red ink in our comments on student papers, and throughout our friendship, we have often agreed on composition theory, politics, and pedagogies.²

Our four sections of basic writing had a total of 57 students completing a survey at the end of the course. The fall semester course (ENG 101) is the first half of a year-long sequence for basic writers (ENG 101/102) at Ball State University. At Ball State, students are placed in basic writing based on high school rank and Verbal SAT scores. Exceptions can be made for small high schools and for students successfully testing into another course.

Procedure

For this study, I chose to compare red ink with only blue ink in order to gain a simple comparison at this time. First, blue is a common ink color that should draw no response from students based on merely color. Second, blue should stand out (as red does) from students' texts, which are often printed in black ink. I chose not to involve pencil, which would introduce the variable of a different writing utensil rather than a different ink color. Future studies could compare red ink to more unusual ink colors that might be similar to red, such as pink or purple—for a discussion of fuchsia, see Bartosenski (1992)—or involve more neutral colors such as pencil or green ink.

To counterbalance for the effects of class meeting times on the outcome of this study, I used red ink in my 1:00 section and blue in my 3:00, and Greg used red ink in his 3:00 section and blue in his 1:00. The table below shows the design of the study and the number of students participating:

TABLE 6.1

Design of the Study and Number of Participants

	Red Ink	Blue Ink
Cindy	1:00 (N=15)	3:00 (N=14)
Greg	3:00 (N=12)	1:00 (N=16)
Total (N=57)	27 Students	30 Students

Greg and I used red ink for one class and blue ink for the other on all student writing: journals, rough drafts, exercises, and final drafts. As Greg and I discussed *how* we comment on students' papers, we learned how similar we are: we both concentrate on global concerns, such as organization, development, and focus; we both avoid thorough editing of texts and instead find error patterns, marking the first few to show the student the pattern, and then encouraging the student to find the rest on his/her own (or with help in a conference); we both give summary comments at the end with a mix of positive comments and suggestions for improvement; we both ask questions about content if we're confused, offer praise for good ideas, or offer comments about how we might personally relate to what a student is saying. Given the idiosyncratic nature of teacher comments, I was glad to find another teacher so similar to my own commenting style in the context of teaching basic writing courses.

Instrument

On the last day of class, students evaluated Greg and me for the English Department, a standard procedure every term. In addition to the standard evaluation that the Department gives Writing Program students, we asked our students in this study to complete a survey (see Appendix). I made four packets of the survey and coded them for the four groups (cr, cb, gr, gb), using the teacher's first initial to separate packets by teacher (c or g), then using the first initials of red and blue to separate packets by color (r or b).

Limitations

Because my primary concern here was to assess the effect of red vs. blue ink, I did not gather demographic data at this time, although such inquiry could be done in the future, assessing, for instance, differences in gender or age in response to ink color. One of my classes that participated in this study was nearly all-male; therefore, a split balance

between men and women in this study could be found only if I sought other courses. For now, because the subject group was already small, and because I saw this study as a pilot, I decided not to “make the group smaller” by dividing it further into subgroups (by gender, for example).

RESULTS

First, Question 7 on the survey was designed to test students' memories of their teachers' choice of ink colors. Students were asked, “What ink color did your teacher use when making comments on your papers?” and were given choices of a) blue, b) red, c) green, d) pencil, and e) I don't remember. Most students (46 out of 57, or 80%) correctly remembered the ink color used on their papers. Interestingly, however, more students whose papers were marked in red remembered the color accurately: only 2 out of 27 students (or 7%) in the red group remembered incorrectly, while 9 out of 30 in the blue group (or 30%) remembered the ink color incorrectly. I performed a 2 X 2 chi square analysis and found a significant difference between the two groups for correctly remembering ink color ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 4.657$, $p < .05$), suggesting that students whose papers were marked in red remembered the ink color better. Although a chi square revealed a significance difference, a phi coefficient revealed that the relationship (.286) between ink color and memory may be somewhat weak, possibly due to the small number of students in this pilot. Therefore, although students in this study tended to remember red better than blue, there are likely to be too many exceptions to a firm conclusion on this point.

But overall, and surprisingly, red ink seemed to be slightly favored on average by students in this study. As Table 6.2 shows, students whose papers were marked with red ink thought their teachers' comments were more fair (Question 1), encouraging (Question 2), and constructive (Question 3), based on the mean scores given to the first three questions. Table 6.2 shows the mean scores and standard deviations for student

responses on the first three questions. Those who saw only red ink judged their teachers' comments more favorably on average, though no differences were statistically significant.³

Notice that of these three items, the blue group had higher standard deviations in two of the items—teachers' fairness and encouragement—indicating that students in the red group agreed more consistently in their responses to these items.

TABLE 6.2

Student Judgments of Teacher Comments

(5 = strongly agree; 3 = Neutral; 1 = strongly disagree)

Red N = 30; Blue N = 27

		Red	Blue
1. I feel my teacher made very fair comments on my papers. ($F_{1,53} = 2.95, p > .05$)	M	4.67	4.33
	SD	0.595	0.796
2. My teacher gave me adequate encouragement in his/her comments. ($F_{1,53} = 1.00, p > .05$)	M	4.57	4.37
	SD	0.575	0.755
3. My teacher used constructive criticism rather than negative. ($F_{1,53} = 2.95, p > .05$)	M	4.48	4.37
	SD	0.775	0.727

TABLE 6.3

Emotion toward Teacher Comments

(5 = strongly agree; 3 = Neutral; 1 = strongly disagree)

Red N = 30; Blue N = 27

		Red	Blue
4. I looked forward to reading my teacher's comments.	M	4.59	4.40
	SD	0.596	0.68
5. I like that my teacher writes on my papers. ($F_{1,53} = 1.00, p > .05$)	M	4.74	4.80
	SD	0.453	0.41

Because the issue here centers on students' emotional responses to red ink, I was sure to ask about their feelings, such as looking forward to reading teacher comments and simply "liking" the fact that the teacher commented at all. Table 6.3 shows the average score given to Questions 4 and 5 on the survey, items that I hoped would illustrate students' emotional responses to teacher comments. As Table 6.3 shows, students whose papers were marked in red ink responded more favorably to one item, but less favorably to another.

Though there was no significant difference between red and blue ink on Question 4 ($F_{1,53}=.87, p>.05$), it's surprising that students in the red ink group rated this item more favorably at all. Differences in responses to Question 5, however, showed that students whose papers were marked in blue "liked" that their teachers wrote on their papers, an item I had hoped would determine if red vs. blue ink had an effect on students' sensitivity to their papers being marked in the first place. This difference, too, was not significant ($F_{1,53}=.38, p>.05$), though this item was the only one in which blue had a higher mean than red.

Table 6.4 shows students' responses to Question 6, which tried to determine how students reacted to the amount of comments teachers provided. The question asked if teachers, in the students' opinions, wrote "an adequate amount" on their papers, but it did not seek to determine if students felt teachers wrote too little or too much. For the purposes of this study, "too little or too much" is another issue: students' negative or positive response to the item, regardless of the reason, is all I sought here. One student, in a written comment on the survey, however, indicated that the teacher did not write enough; otherwise, no data to that effect was gathered.

Note that the standard deviation for the blue group is more than four times higher than the red group's variability, suggesting a much higher consistency with which the students in the red group responded to this item. There was also a significance difference ($F_{1,53}=8.48, p < .01$) in students' responses to the amount of comments Greg and I made on

TABLE 6.4

Amount of Teacher Comments

(5 = strongly agree; 3 = Neutral; 1 = strongly disagree)
 Red N = 30; Blue N = 27

		Red	Blue
I feel my teacher wrote an	M	4.59	4.40
adequate amount: not too much,	SD	0.596	0.68
not too little.			

their papers. Students in the blue ink group were significantly more dissatisfied than the red ink group, but there were no significant differences between Greg's group and mine, as Table 6.5 shows.

TABLE 6.5

*Analysis of Variance for Question 6:
 Students' Satisfaction with Amount of Comment*

Source	df	Mean Sq	F	Sig
Teacher	1	0.37201	0.65	0.4242
Ink Color	1	4.86258	8.48	.0053*
Teacher X Ink	1	0.63616	4.11	0.2971
Residual	53	0.57358		

*p<.01

In spite of all of the questions on this survey, I was most interested in students' responses to Question 9, which asked them to comment on the nature of red ink. While I expected no significant difference among students' responses to this question, I was surprised that of 27 students whose papers were marked in red ink, *none* of them described red as having a "harsh, negative" tone. In contrast, 40% of the students whose papers were marked in blue ink suggested that a "harsh, negative tone" is associated with red ink. More surprisingly, 19% of the students in the red ink group indicated

that red is “bright and cheerful,” while only 4% of the blue ink group suggested the same.

In other words, the only students in this study who responded negatively to red ink were students whose papers were *not marked in red*. Table 6.6 shows the percentage of responses to each choice given in Question 9:

TABLE 6.6

Students' Descriptions of Red Ink
(percentages will not add to 100%. Two students did not answer this question.)

Descriptions of Red Ink	Red	Blue
Red ink has a harsh, negative tone.	0%	40%
Red ink is easy to see.	78%	50%
Red ink is bright and cheerful.	19%	3%

A 2 x 3 chi square analysis showed a significant difference in how students perceived red ink ($X^2_{(2)} = 15.71, p < .001$), and a phi coefficient of .53 indicates a fairly strong relationship between the ink color actually used with students and their perceptions of that ink color. Further, the fact that the majority of students (78%) in the red ink group thought that red ink is easy to see fits well with the higher accuracy with which students in the red ink group recalled the color used on their papers (Question 7, discussed earlier).

Question 8 asked students to recommend an ink color for their teachers to use in the future. They were given options of a) blue, b) red, c) green, d) pencil, e) it really doesn't matter to me, and f) other (with a note for them to specify). I wasn't surprised to see that the majority of students (52.5%) noted that it didn't matter to them. However, the second-highest recommendation (overall) was for red ink, with 37% of the red ink group recommending red and even 17% of the blue ink group recommending that red be used in the future. Table 6.7

shows the percentages of students' future recommendations, divided by which ink color their teacher had used. Only one student marked "other," recommending purple.

To conduct a chi square analysis, I deleted the categories not under consideration here—green, pencil, and other—and kept only red, blue, and "it doesn't matter." In a 2 x 3 chi square, then, I found a significant difference among students'

TABLE 6.7

Student Recommendations for Future Ink Color
(Percentages are rounded.)

Recommendation	Red	Blue	Total
Blue	4%	27%	16.0%
Red	37%	17%	26.0%
Green	0%	0%	0.0%
Pencil	4%	3%	3.5%
Doesn't Matter	55%	50%	52.5%
Other	0%	3%	3.0%

recommendations for future ink color ($X^2_{(2)} = 6.77, p < .05$) (phi coefficient = .35), suggesting that most students in this study really don't care what ink color we use. The second most popular recommendation, however, was for the ink color with which students were already familiar: for students in the red group, red was the second-highest recommendation; for students in the blue group, blue was the second-highest recommendation. We could explore this issue in future research: if students had not been given "it really doesn't matter" as an option, would we see the "familiar" color chosen most frequently?

I ended the study at the end of Fall 1997 when these students completed ENG 101, the first half of the basic writing sequence (ENG 101/102). When the same students came back for ENG 102 in Spring 1998, I did not ask Greg to continue the red/blue study, and I decided to end my part of the study in the second semester by switching to a third ink color—black, which I felt was more "neutral."

One day during ENG 102, however, some students began to discuss their talents as creative writers. Without any prompting from me, though we were about to do a creative writing assignment, my students began to wonder: were they better creative writers or academic writers? As the discussion continued, I commented on what I felt were my own strengths—academic writing—and noted that I'm probably a better critic than a creative writer. One student laughed, "Yeah! I can tell! All those red marks on my papers!" Other students laughed good-naturedly, but one student turned to face the first: "You still get RED? I only get BLACK!" Looking at me, he moaned and accused, "That's just so unfair!" Interestingly, the first student remembered red comments, even though I had switched to black ink. Another noticed the switch in color but felt he was somehow getting "less."

DISCUSSION

These surprising results, which showed either no difference in students' reactions to red vs. blue ink or showed that red ink was slightly preferred to blue should cause our field to rethink the lore of red ink that it has created. Most results here were not statistically significant, so I cannot make a claim as strong as "students prefer red ink." At the same time, I was surprised to see *any* preference for red ink at all, especially in the context of our commonly-held belief that red ink is negative. If the lore remained "true," we should have seen a much greater preference for blue ink. I believe that these results were due to two factors in particular.

First, the context in which the red ink lore began has changed. Surprisingly, the lore has not. In early research on teachers' comments, much discussion focused on "negative" vs. "positive" commentary (Schaub, 1997). Other research showed the ineffectiveness of some kinds of comments, such as thorough editing of the text, cryptic remarks in the margin (such as "awk"), or simple grades with no explanation. Applebee (1981) and Anson (1989) reported that the amount of

teacher comments on merely surface errors was as high as 71% and 75%, respectively.

In that context, the lore of red ink began: the accepted practice of more negative comments than positive ones, and the frequent attention to error. Since then, teachers are more informed about the effects of their comments, and several texts have been devoted solely to the art of teacher commentary.⁴ Given changes in the way our field treats assessment, this pilot study suggests the need to rethink the lore that accompanies assessment as well.

In spite of changes in our profession, the lore that has defined that profession remains unchanged, and North's (1987) prophetic statement—that once something has been added to lore, it cannot be removed from it—has proven not only to be true, but unfortunate as well, especially in the evolving contexts in which we work.

Second, our own construction of the red ink lore has been based, in part, on our own literary training. "Red," after all, is never "missed" by the literary critic or the English teacher as a significant choice of color by a writer. For us, red means death, blood, war, lust, or danger—because we have been trained to see it as such. How else has a simple ink color so easily conjured so many violent images in our scholarship?

Blue, too, is quite symbolic—of sadness, water, air, tranquility—yet, we do not give much attention to that. Nor do we give attention to the white paper and black ink our students use, though such colors are as equally traditional for students as red pens are for teachers.

If we were to supplement our literary interpretations with cognitive interpretations, we would come to understand that red ink does not *deserve* this attention. It simply *grabs* our attention: a color as bright and as bold as red, meaningful in literary circles, is simply, in cognitive terms, salient, especially on student papers produced on traditional white paper with black ink. Perhaps our students have not been victimized by the red pen so much as we have been victimized by our lack of

understanding of such cognitive principles as “perception” and “human memory.”

And what about our students? For most of our freshmen, such literary training has not been so deeply ingrained. How can we assume that their reaction to red ink will be as literary as ours and, therefore, as negative? Students in this study suggested the most practical reason for using red: it’s easy to see. And don’t we want them to do just that? See—not “see as we see,” but, simply, “see.”

CONCLUSION

In our quest to embrace democratic pedagogies, red ink has become a symbol of all that we hope to avoid. From political, literary, and emotional standpoints, then, we have constructed the belief that red ink in our communication with students via our comments on their papers is negative, violent, and hurtful. Research that validates or refutes such beliefs must, in contrast, examine as objectively as possible such “truths.” While this pilot study (or others like it) cannot examine deeply an individual’s response to ink color, it does suggest the power of such research to examine broadly the equally broad belief we hold regarding ink color.

Do we really want to maintain such a deeply held belief about something as silly as ink color? Do we really believe that students are more affected by the color of our comments than by the content or tone? And in our quest to examine authority and power in the classroom (and our own paradoxical willingness to embrace authority and power in order to “give” some to our students), shouldn’t we admit that removing red ink from the situation is merely a bandage and not a cure?

Such passionate attention to ink color diverts our attention from other, more important, issues—as unpleasant as some of those issues might be (even more unpleasant than the odious red pen). For instance, when an undergraduate peer tutor from our writing center began her first high school teaching job after graduation, she called me one night, appalled to learn her

school's policy that all teachers *must* use red ink on students' work. Although, as writing center director at the time, I didn't recall talking about red ink in particular, our tutor training program did include numerous readings in which red ink was portrayed as the enemy, and this was one tutor in particular who attended as many professional conferences as she could, where she was undoubtedly exposed to the lore. Now an English teacher herself, this former tutor, because of her training, couldn't escape the lore of red ink and, more importantly, couldn't escape the passion surrounding such lore.

Because I felt partly responsible for her distress, I spent several minutes encouraging her to calmly ask her principal for the origin of the policy, and I pointed out a possible and unfortunate cause: if her school had trouble with students falsifying records, changing grades, or forging teachers' signatures, a standardized ink color might be a part of their solution to preventing such problems. I told her a story of a high school classmate of my own, who once erased and then changed some of his grades written in pencil in our senior English teacher's gradebook when she left her gradebook unattended one day.

Although I became a teacher one day myself, my own adolescent past included a talent for forging teachers' signatures on hall passes—a harmless prank, or so I thought, until I grew up and learned more about schools and their legal responsibilities. Fortunately, no one for whom I had written a hall pass had been injured or had caused harm to someone else.

This former tutor had been so fortunate to have worked mostly with highly motivated, sincere, honest college students in our writing center. Unfortunately, we teachers also know that not all students are the same, and especially in the context of working with teenagers, we know their desire to test the limits sometimes—an unfortunate impetus for much classroom policy/policing.

But on the brighter side, colors—even red—are useful in many ways. For instance, my own students recently reminded me of the importance of color-coding their papers—or what

Bartosenski (1992) called “painting a paper”—something I often encourage my students to do. Two of my most motivated students in a basic writing course in the Spring of 1998 (the red ink group in this very study) were often models of collaboration—Ryan and Chad shared their papers with each other in and out of class, energetically discussed the points they were trying to make, made helpful suggestions that they accepted or rejected, asked critical questions, called me in to settle several disputes, but refused to “do the work” for each other.

One day, during a peer review session, Ryan brought my purse from the front desk to where I was sitting with another group of students in the back of the room. “Do you have a red pen?” Ryan asked, handing me my purse. “Chad needs to color-code his paper. It’s all messed up.” From across the room, Chad laughed at himself, yelling, “Yeah! It’s a mess! But we just figured it out!”

Could such excellent collaboration among students even occur in a classroom in which the teacher used the threatening red ink? Could such rapport develop in this classroom (with authoritative red ink) to the point that a student feels comfortable bringing me my purse from across the room? Could such excellent skills at self-assessment and peer review emerge in a classroom bloodied by a red pen? Of course. Because there’s so much more to my teaching and yours than the color of an ink.

Studies such as this one provide a deeper look into our beliefs—what they are, where they come from, and whom or what they are for. As teachers frequently grapple with how to comment on student papers, the avoidance of red ink should not provide a superficial kind of relief. Just as we ask ourselves hard questions about how to word those comments or how much to comment (and where), we should examine more fully the effects of what those comments look like—not assuming, uncritically, that one color is “off limits” and the others are all somehow (equally) acceptable. Further, research such as this will not only test those beliefs, but could also place our beliefs in

the larger context of student-teacher rapport, assignment making, cognition, and individual conferences. As our field rapidly changes, so must our lore—especially when that lore doesn't make sense to the people who matter the most—our students.

What's next for my classroom, my students, and the pens in my purse? To be honest, I'm not sure. Should I continue using red ink? I discovered during this study a strange outcome of limiting ourselves to only one color. One night I discovered that I had no red pens at home, but I had to grade papers from the "red ink group." I ran to a nearby 24-hour supermarket to purchase more. It would have ruined my study if I had used another color, but my office was farther away than the supermarket. I laughed all the way there, "Oh, I see. *This is why we shouldn't use red ink!*"

In the semester following this study, I first started using black ink consistently, but later I randomly used whatever writing utensil I first grabbed out of my well-used purse whenever I graded papers: pencils, blue pens, red pens. It didn't matter, I thought, but in the back of my mind the question remained, "doesn't it?" These students remembered red, responded somewhat more favorably to red, and, on one day, even asked for red.

Next, then, will be more experimentation because I can't quite decide what to do. I started this study thinking that ink color didn't matter at all. Now I suspect that it does, but not in the way our lore has taught us. I would first like to continue gathering data in the same manner from more students, perhaps adding interviews that will give fuller descriptions of students' reactions to our red ink lore. A different study could compare (instead of ink color) consistency of ink color: some classes would get a systematic rotation of varied colors, and others would get a steady use of one color. If we keep switching colors, will students' attention be drawn instead to the content of our comments? Will it matter at all? Only future experimentation will reveal that.

SUMMARY

Similar to the interview with Eileen Oliver, this study demonstrates the potential collapse of the qualitative/quantitative dichotomy. The red ink/blue ink pilot study presented here shares, on the one hand, features of both anecdotal and numerical evidence; on the other hand and more accurately, it presents, on the whole, *neither*. It is instead a study that explores a question in the context of the researcher's curiosity, experience, and available resources—a study that demonstrates a Contextualist Research Paradigm that encourages us to explore our research not simply as “qualitative” or “quantitative,” but—simply, and more broadly defined—as research: research conducted in contexts that may produce varied processes/decisions and products/forms.

If we paid attention to only form here, a traditional report would not have the personal voice, narrative threads, anecdotes, or “asides” that I shared for the purpose of illustrating my point of view and examining all kinds of evidence available to me in the context of this study. Similarly, a purely “qualitative” study would not have focused on numerical data and conducted such descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. Attending instead to context, I presented this study in the form most appropriate for what I wanted to know—a decision I made in the process of research that resulted in a product that shares a blend of voices, styles, and forms—all dictated by context.

Applying a Contextualist Research Paradigm has great potential for reconstructing our field—our teachers, researchers, and scholarship. Especially as we conduct and read research, attending to contextualist principles will allow us to examine and accept our research for what it is in its moment—understanding strengths and limitations, knowing that one study never pretends to answer everything about the nature of our work. All research methods have limits—and all research methods have potential—depending on the contexts in which we ask and explore our research questions.

Chapter five, through an illustration, examined the potential of a Contextualist Research Paradigm and its accompanying matrix—to see the breadth of this concept called “research.” Chapter six, through

a demonstration, explored its potential further. Chapter seven will outline other specific needs our field must meet in order to fully embrace a new contextualist paradigm and chapter eight will speculate on the future of composition research.

NOTES

1. Ball State University approval for this study is filed under IRB protocol ID #98-48.
2. I'd like to thank my friend and colleague Greg Siering for participating in this study, even though he normally does not use red ink (though not out of concern for students' reactions, but his own distaste for how the color looks on the page—in his own words, “it's an aesthetic thing”).
3. Statistical significance in this study was determined through stepwise regression analysis through which all variables (teachers, class times, and ink color) were factored in separately to ensure that no differences existed because of differences in teacher, differences in class times, or differences in group sizes per ink color (Greg, for example, had more students in the blue ink group, and I had more students in the red ink group). Computer analysis determined that these differences in group sizes and some other variables produced no significant differences. While the F-values reported here look much like a standard ANOVA, conducting a stepwise regression analysis is a more “sophisticated” way of conducted an ANOVA in some contexts.
4. See, for example, White, Lutz, & Kamusikiri (1996) *Assessment of Writing: Politics, Policies, Practices*; White (1994) *Teaching and Assessing Writing*; Anson (1989) *Writing and Response*; Straub & Lunsford (1995) *Twelve Readers Reading: Responding to College Student Writing*; and Zak & Weaver (1998) *The Theory and Practice of Grading Writing: Problems and Possibilities*.

APPENDIX

Response to Teacher Comments

* please do not put your name on this form *

Please rank the following (5 = strongly agree; 3 = neutral; 1 = strongly disagree)

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I feel my teacher made very fair comments on my papers | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 2. My teacher gave me adequate encouragement in his/her comments | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 3. My teacher used constructive criticism rather than negative | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 4. I looked forward to reading my teacher's comments | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5. I like that my teacher writes on my papers | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 6. I feel my teacher wrote an adequate amount: not too much, not too little | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

Please circle the answers that apply to you:

7. What ink color did your teacher use when making comments on your papers?
- blue
 - red
 - green
 - pencil
 - I don't remember
8. I'd like to recommend the following ink color to my teacher in the future:
- blue
 - red
 - green
 - pencil

e. it really doesn't matter to me

f. Other: _____

9. Please circle the statement that is most fitting to you

(please circle only ONE):

a. Red ink has a harsh, negative tone

b. Red ink is easy to see

c. Red ink is bright and cheerful