Composing Research

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7 PREDICTOR VARIABLES
The Future of Composition Research

> Rhetoric has as its domain all aspects of the argumentative
> mode of discourse including logic, dialectic, and the
> methodology of science.
>
> *Walter Weimer, 1979*

To fully embrace the Contextualist Research Paradigm, we must take other steps that will enable us to do so. This chapter will focus on specific recommendations for changing the direction of our research trends: reconsidering MLA as a style manual, understanding the exclusionary voices of our storytellers, incorporating our research in our teaching, training our researchers more completely in a wider range of research methods and statistics, and embracing numbers as natural phenomena. All of these specific recommendations are made with an eye toward the overall context of our field's quest to define itself and construct its boundaries in an accurate, respectable, and flexible manner.

MLA VOICE, MY VOICE

When I began this project, I was writing in MLA style. I later changed to APA, but I couldn't explain why—something about MLA style bothered me in this work. I thought perhaps APA would make more sense if only because of my interest in science and psychology and in numerical evidence. And, personally, I've always preferred APA to MLA anyway. But, still, I couldn't figure out why.

MLA treats text as a "living" object of study, always in front of us, always available to us. Therefore, if I were to write about Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Morrison's *Paradise*, I would use present tense for both, regardless of how old or how new those texts are, or how many centuries separate the two. That is the convention of literature and of literary criticism—and justifiably so. The novel, the poem, the short

story—works of literature—can always be interpreted, reinterpreted, criticized, but the work itself will not change. Once it is published, it's published. It's "there." Forever. Thus, present tense treats the text adequately—the work "is."

In composition, however, in spite of numerous publications that will also be there "forever," our texts serve a different purpose: constructing theory, presenting research, and discussing pedagogy are acts that focus not on the *product* of the text that resulted from such inquiry, but on the *process* of thinking that was used to arrive at that text in the first place and the later application of those ideas to our work. Yet, because of our ties to literature, we continue to use MLA style in our own publications[1]—as if the scholarship we are reviewing is "present" in text form rather than "past" in thought form. And because our texts are based on theory, research, and pedagogy (rather than fiction), our use of MLA ties the theories, research, and pedagogies to their authors in the present tense as if those authors still believe—still currently "live" in—that theory, research, or pedagogy. In other words, the present tense that MLA requires for treatment of *text*, is transferred instead, in composition, to treatment of *authors*. As a result, our criticism, citations, and use of composition scholarship locks the author—rather than the text—in present tense.

Consider, for example, Bushman's (1998) use of Flower's (1979) cognitive description of writer-based and reader-based prose:

> Linda Flower *explains* this phenomenon in cognitive terms and, like Vygotsky, *believes* that a writer must "transform" one's "writer-based prose" into "reader-based prose." (10, emphasis mine)

Citing a theory that is almost 20 years old in a manner that makes Flower (and, worse, Vygotsky) "still believe"—always—something she published in 1979 de-contextualizes our work. To write about composition publications in the present tense creates the illusion that our authors, regardless of the amount of time that has passed, still believe their theories of twenty years before.

Because the constraints of MLA documentation demand present tense, composition publications that require MLA style limit our authors and decontextualize our work in four ways: 1) the authors

currently writing and publishing must use present tense advocated by the MLA regardless of what is best in the context of their work, 2) present tense for both our discussion/analysis/commentary and our source citations makes it more difficult for readers to distinguish between the author's own voice and the voices of other texts to which the author refers, 3) present tense does not allow authors who are being cited to have their own works viewed in the context in which they were originally published, and 4) authors cited in present tense are locked into what they *believed* (in 1979, in Flower's case) as if those works will always represent what those authors are thinking *now* (i.e., Flower can't learn anything more after 1979 that would change her mind).

Present tense, as required by MLA when reviewing scholarship, has a certain "indefinite" tone to it, suggesting "always, forever," while at the same time a certain "definitiveness" to it, suggesting a "rigid, locked" status of our scholarship and our scholars. In reality, our past publications are so often revisited, revised, and extended beyond themselves, and, certainly, the authors themselves continue to grow, change, and refine their beliefs. Frequent interchanges of ideas through our scholarship create new theories, new research, new pedagogies, even from the authors who once proposed the "old." This scholarship, in other words, is not literary and will, therefore, be "changed." While Toni Morrison, for example, might write differently in her next novel, or might write even better than she already does, no amount of criticism or questions or reviews will make Morrison change *Paradise* or change the "idea" that produced it—because no one would ever expect her to. It's literature. And that's what literature is, and that's what the MLA is historically about.

In contrast to MLA, the APA recommends past tense. Research was completed in the past, after all, and theories proposed are published in the past as well. For APA, the context of time is important, which is why the year is placed near the authors' names in APA citations.[2] To show the difference that using APA can make in composition scholarship, consider the following paragraph, a combination of reference and commentary, printed earlier in this work. The passage is in APA style, with the verb phrases highlighted:

But such a study *takes* time and, worse, *requires* quantifying and analyzing data (numbers, in other words), and Elbow *warned* us in the same book that any reduction of anything to a single number is "untrustworthy" (251). Never mind that Elbow *warned* us also 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 qualitative 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.

The past tense in reference to Elbow helps separate his voice (established by past tense) from my own voice and commentary (established by present tense). Past tense here also ties what Elbow *said* only to the specific work being cited, not to "Elbow's thoughts generally and for all time," keeping his words tied closely to the specific context in which they were written—the most honest and fair look at any author in the first place.

Further, in my own classrooms, I am reminded of my students' needs to learn APA documentation for their own fields. On the first day of class in Composition II (which has a focus on research), I give students a survey, asking about their familiarity with MLA documentation, their comfort with computers and the library, and other questions, including "What is your major?" Most students are majoring in fields that require APA: education, social work, psychology, and so on. Other students are undecided. As a writing teacher, it is my duty to discuss not only MLA, but APA also, and, more importantly, to allow students to choose one or the other for their research projects, as they decide which is more appropriate in the context of their research and their futures. Several students opt for MLA because they've been taught MLA in Composition I and ultimately choose the familiar (and, of course, some decide that MLA is more appropriate for their tasks). Most students, however, are grateful for the chance to learn APA, and, similar to my own experience as a psychology major (in which only one professor figured out that no one else was teaching APA documentation and format), they feared no one was ever going to help them learn it.

I propose that composition scholars abandon MLA as a style manual. Using other styles such as APA will help us establish our voices more clearly, will help us understand our scholarship and our scholars in their contexts more strongly, and will more accurately reflect the notion that our authors frequently refine their ideas and beliefs.

VOICES, STORYTELLERS, POWER, AND TENURE

Researchers have many voices. Even the so-called impersonal voice of traditional research—the voice that is seen as voiceless because it is drowned by a system of other researchers, other theories, data, and a traditional format for a report—is, in itself, a voice nonetheless: a voice chosen by the researcher at that moment, in that context of his/her research shared in the most appropriate forum, a voice that chooses at the moment to focus readers' attention on issues other than itself. A researcher's voice in the most traditional-looking research report isn't as "drowned" as we might think: adhering to styles such as APA helps distinguish researchers' voices (using present tense for discussions, conclusions, experience, commentary, analyses) from the voices of others (using past tense for literature reviews and for descriptions of methods). Such clarification, in fact, helps reveal the full context in which a researcher is operating by clearly outlining the sources—such as "formal" publication *and* "informal" interaction with others—of a researcher's thoughts (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984).

Adopting any voice—as varied as those voices might be—is a rhetorical act, a rhetorical decision, made by a writer in a particular context. Unfortunately, several composition scholars now advocate a "personal voice" through storytelling as the only necessary voice in our scholarship, regardless of other necessities, regardless of the writer's own personal decision to do otherwise, and regardless of the context in which the researcher is writing.

And who are the storytellers in composition today? For the most part, we have two groups of scholars in composition from whom we readily accept the story. First, the "big names." Peter Elbow, Louise Phelps, Teresa Enos, Joe Trimmer, Donald Graves, the presidents of our organizations—these names have earned the right to tell stories

because they paid their dues earlier with traditional scholarship. (How else does someone become a keynote speaker? We all *have* stories, of course, but not everyone is allowed to *tell* one at a convention in front of everybody.) Spack (1997) commented on the unwillingness of mainstream journals to publish "the personal," citing Gebhardt's (1992) admission that during his tenure as editor of *CCC* (1987-1993), "personal perspective essays" were reserved for "leaders" of our field (20). In other words, once a scholar has established a reputation via other, more traditional forms of scholarship—including a doctoral dissertation— the rules that govern their scholarship lighten up. Storytellers emerge when our field has granted them the privilege to do so.

In Trimmer's *Narration as Knowledge* (1997), for example, who were the storytellers? Lad Tobin, Toby Fulwiler, Wendy Bishop, James Clifford, Chris Anson, Sondra Perl, Lillian Bridwell-Bowles . . . There were only a few "names" I didn't recognize at first—names I felt I probably *should* know but didn't (in the neverending remnants of graduate-student guilt that comes from not studying absolutely *everything*). But most of the names I *had* studied. I had to study them in order to earn my degree, write my exams, and earn the privilege of writing a dissertation. What's next for me? That depends. If I earn a "name," can I, too, tell stories? For now, my stories had better be embedded in the larger context of scholarship, research, and dissertation-like citations to everybody else's name but my own.

For those who argue that stories are somehow automatically "inclusive"—that they allow everyone to have a voice and do not systematically marginalize anyone—consider Gunner and McNenny's (1997) description of how they invited speakers to the Conference on Basic Writing, held at CCCC 1997 in Phoenix:

> In inviting the workshop speakers, we were quite aware of the political truism that the voices heard are the voices that validate. To have our issues "spoken into existence," in a sense, we looked in some cases to have speakers who themselves wield some professional and institutional power. Victor Villanueva, Gary Tate, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Ira Shor: were they themselves not so committed to inclusiveness, our invitations to them would really have been a kind of exploitation, of their names, status, and labor. (3-4)

Invited to ride the coat-tails of this inclusiveness, paradoxically validated by the institutional and professional power granted to the few, were newcomers, new storytellers: with Gary Tate, John McMillan and Elizabeth Woodworth; with Jacqueline Jones Royster, Rebecca Greenberg Taylor. Indeed, storytellers at this conference were ones with names and power, who invited and mentored a few fortunate graduate students and junior faculty to become storytellers and temporarily attach their otherwise powerless names to ones with power—the leaders of our field whose personal perspectives we value.

Undergraduates form the second group of composition scholars we readily allow to tell stories: the peer tutor. Especially in venues like the "Tutors' Column" of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, undergraduate peer tutors are encouraged to share their experiences and tell their stories. That's OK. Because they're still undergraduates, we don't expect extensive knowledge of the scholarship in our field. And because the work of the peer tutor is commonly described as beginning primarily in "practice" rather than in "theory," we value their experiences and stories before they become tainted, while they're still honest, and while they present and publish—not for tenure, but for *knowledge*, for learning, for the challenge of it all, and sometimes just for fun or, especially, for that good feeling we all get afterwards.

In other words, the two groups in composition most likely to be storytellers (and be readily accepted as such) are those who have achieved status ("big names") and those who couldn't care less about status yet (undergraduate peer tutors). In the meantime, those who are somewhere in the gray middle of the spectrum (graduate students, new Ph.D's, non-tenured professors, adjunct faculty) have not yet earned the privilege of just telling stories (as if everyone would listen) but have moved beyond the undergraduate years when that's almost all we had to share.[3]

While systems for achieving tenure are being questioned currently, we are still tenure-seeking professionals who understand the value of institutional power and are, therefore, still bound by older rules governing the granting of tenure at most universities. Can telling stories alone earn us tenure? Probably not. But *theorizing* the role of storytelling in our scholarship, *epistemizing* storytelling, surely can. Spurred

on, perhaps, by contentions such as Boyer's (1990) that "a new vision of scholarship is required . . . to clarify campus missions and relate the work of the academy more directly to the realities of contemporary life" (13)—to reward faculty time spent teaching and mentoring students, not just time spent as researchers—we have inferred license for the personal, anecdotal research that we now prefer.

But Boyer also reminded us that when current tenure systems were formulated, "research *per se* was not the problem. The problem was that the research mission, which was appropriate for *some* institutions, created a shadow over the entire higher learning enterprise" (12). To help rewrite those missions in a way that would help us value both research and teaching, Boyer identified four kinds of scholarship in a model that does not suggest we stop doing traditional research, but that places our research in the larger cycle, the larger context, of our scholarly work (17-25):

1. The Scholarship of Discovery
   - knowledge for its own sake
   - traditional definition of "research"
   - asks, "what is there to know?"
2. The Scholarship of Integration
   - dependent on and related to the scholarship of discovery
   - connects knowledge to larger contexts, ideas, other disciplines
   - asks, "what does this knowledge mean?"
3. The Scholarship of Application
   - dependent on and related to the scholarship of discovery and integration
   - applies knowledge to useful contexts
   - asks, "who or what can this knowledge help?"
4. The Scholarship of Teaching
   - transmitting, transforming, and extending the discovery, integration, and application of knowledge
   - makes others aware of the application of integrated discoveries
   - asks, "what more do we need to know?" (return to discovery)

In casual conversations with others in my field, I've often heard Boyer's name mentioned in support of the "scholarship of teaching,"

as if he separated teaching from this model, elevating it above the larger context of discovery, integration, and application of knowledge. Instead, Boyer argued, "What we urgently need today is a more inclusive view of what it means to be a scholar—a recognition that knowledge is acquired through research, through synthesis, through practice, and through teaching" (24). For Boyer, "inspired teaching keeps the flame of scholarship alive" (24)—all scholarship. And though it appears in varied forms, such scholarship must not be so separate from our teaching.

TEACHING OUR RESEARCH

One argument frequently put forth in defense of experience-based narratives is that such narratives create closer ties between our research and our teaching. We *are* quite good at sharing stories and research about our teaching, but we so seldom do the reverse: teach our research. Some scholars have asked this question before: "Why don't we teach our research or our theory to our students?" Troyka (1984), for instance, proposed that basic writers read texts from the classical rhetoric that first shaped our field. Schilb (1991) argued that composition students should be "coinquirers into the ramifications of cultural studies and postmodernism" as students "may hunger for genuine intellectual substance" (187). Harkin (1991) contrasted our field to chemistry, where research will ultimately be taught in chemistry courses. Research in chemistry is an integral, necessary part of *learning* chemistry. We would be hard-pressed to assert that we, too, pass on our research to our students in a manner that will help them engage fully in the study of writing. Frequent use of texts like readers and handbooks indicates that we still prefer, in spite of a so-called new paradigm, to rely on examples/models, study questions, and rules.

Unless we share our research with our students, we won't like the answer to a most difficult question: "Whose knowledge do we advance when we conduct research and publish our inquiry?" For now, the answer is "ours," not our students'. And whose knowledge *should* we serve in the end? A text such as Elbow and Belanoff's *Community of Writers*, for instance, offers clear case studies of writers

in action, including the authors. What would happen if we provided students with excellent case studies such as those with other research: Brand's (1989) research on affective responses to writing, Jensen and DiTiberio's (1989) research on the MBTI, Straub's (1997) research on teachers' comments, Oliver's (1995) research on writing prompts, Johnson's (1991) review of the history of writing in the last century?

Incorporating more of our research into our composition text-books, of course, places greater demands on our field. First, it requires that we stop arguing about research so much and start doing some (see Charney, 1996; Barton, 1997). Second, it requires that our research be useful not only to teachers, editors, and tenure commit-tees, but also, and more importantly, to the students who need it. Teaching our research will make us more accountable for that research, will open a different and necessary dialogue about research with students (and, by extension, ourselves), will present our disci-pline to our students in the full, rich context of its long history and varied inquiry, and will invite students to conduct their own inquiry into the nature of composing—outcomes that will bridge more solidly the gap we have created between our teaching and our scholarship and research.

But are we prepared to do so?

TRAINING OUR RESEARCHERS

Numerous scholars have pointed to the lack of training in research and statistics by composition graduate programs designed to produce "humanists." Lauer and Asher (1988), Hayes and Young, et al. (1992), North (1985), and Ede (1992), to name only a few, have all com-mented in some way on our limited training. We can still find com-position programs that require more literature than composition or that require at least some literature training instead of training in research design and statistics.

In an online survey of eight doctoral programs in composition (March 1998, consortium-l@mtu.edu), none of the eight respondents indicated that their programs require a course in statistics, and only one-half, or four, of those programs provided training in "quantita-tive" research methods, though three of those four blended these

methods in the same course as "qualitative." All eight respondents indicated that research and research designs relying on numerical evidence are not highly valued in their programs. Further, four of the eight respondents indicated that scores on the Quantitative section of the GRE are less important than Verbal and Analytical scores, and two indicated that Quantitative *and* Analytical scores are less important than Verbal scores when admitting doctoral students to their programs. Only one respondent indicated that all three sections are treated equally, and one chose not to answer the question. Thus, in addition to not consistently providing training for our doctoral students, we do not highly value potential and important indicators of their math training, ability, or anxiety. While these eight programs might not be representative of the broader field and of all doctoral programs, the eight programs in this survey represent the training currently provided to 182 doctoral students.

Add to this inadequate textbooks designed to train the composition researcher (as reviewed in chapter two), and the result is that our training (if we receive any at all) is, at best, potentially misguided. Our strongest and most comprehensive text yet is Hayes and Young, et al. (1992), *Reading Empirical Research Studies: The Rhetoric of Research.* As the title suggests, the editors focused on the rhetoric of research: "the scientist is to be seen as a practicing rhetorician" (8). The collection of eighteen studies, with comments on strengths and weaknesses by the editors and reflections by the original authors, is an excellent text for any course on research. A special chapter is devoted to how to read traditional research reports, all couched in an argument similar to the one I am making here: "By and large, those responsible for maintaining and improving writing instruction in this country cannot, without further training, access the work that could help them carry out their responsibilities better" (6). Still, editors of this text, as others have done, refer readers elsewhere for the most difficult part of the research process—statistical analysis.

At the same time, graduate students are under more pressure than ever to publish their work while still in graduate school. The job market is such that the standard "publish or perish" pressure often reserved for the tenure line has trickled down to the graduate student—not in the

same way, of course (one wouldn't be kicked out of graduate school for not publishing), but in a way that may block our full entrance to the field in the first place—perishing before they even start. In the October 1997 *MLA Job Listing*, for instance, numerous composition positions required "substantial" publication experiences, and one posting even noted "preferably a book."

In other words, graduate students are pushed to publish before they are fully trained researchers. And, certainly, they are capable of publishing the kinds of work they are trained to do: textual analysis/criticism, theoretical explorations, political debates, stories. Therefore, the trend of criticizing research, arguing about research, defending preferred methods more often than actually exploring all kinds of research will likely continue unless our training programs change.

Anderson (1998) speculated on the ethics of our research, a component of research we also omit if our programs neglect full training. Anderson questioned the ethics of sharing unpublished student essays or quoting their spoken words (64) in much of our research—most quoting and sharing we see in our qualitative research—and hoped to make readers aware of the NCTE and CCCC guidelines for securing students' permission to do so. For Anderson, our field, in contrast to the social sciences, lacks training in research ethics.

> the social sciences' extensive discourse on research ethics is so deeply embedded in those fields that it constitutes a form of tacit knowledge. . . . For example, knowledge of the *APA Ethics Code* is so pervasive in psychology that most books on psychology research methods don't even mention it. Composition's pioneering introductions to social science research methods (Kirsch and Sullivan; Lauer and Asher) resemble similar books written by social scientists because they discuss techniques only—but differ because they are not set in a context that includes a rich, disciplinary discussion of the techniques' ethical dimensions. (65)

Anderson included sample permission forms as appendices to his article and questioned our use of them in most research thus far. Indeed, our training in research methods is so limited that we should be concerned about the ethics of the research we publish. No graduate course on research in composition should omit discussion of ethics and

practice writing IRB proposals, for example, and no course that requires graduate students to conduct an educational study should omit the IRB proposal and approval as a required assignment. Writing such proposals demands that the writer be clear, convincing, and knowledgeable of the methods employed—all in the context of why the research question is important and how the research findings will be used.

Composition scholars need training in a wide range of research methods—and in statistics—but one course alone won't do the job. Ideally, courses would be offered concurrently with other content-driven courses and in a manner that fits well with the overall context of the program, allowing students the opportunity to design studies on issues of interest to them. A small, manageable study such as the red ink/blue ink study presented in chapter six offers a model of the kinds of designs and statistical analyses students could learn in the context of their own questions, becoming more sophisticated in design as they move on. Graduate students should never be pressured to produce publishable manuscripts of those fledgling studies—they must first learn, make those false starts, discover those mistakes, and, by the end of their programs, be stronger for it. Does "just practicing" research methods in a classroom make them less "real"? No. Like practicing medicine or writing student papers, we recognize that such practice always feeds long-term goals.

To help train researchers, our field needs a text that explains statistics in contexts that composition researchers will understand. The bowling alley study throughout chapters two, three, and four in this work provided, I hope, a beginning. Though a bowling alley study might seem silly, humor is a useful step toward dissolving the tension that surrounds quantitative research in our field. In plain language, in simple contexts (at first), research design and statistics can be explained as a means of making decisions, as a process for finding out something interesting, and as procedures that can actually be enjoyable and playful.

NUMBERS IN CONTEXT

Finally, let's return to that primary "culprit" in the qualitative-quantitative rift: the number. That untrustworthy, reductive, impersonal

number. And let's admit that, sometimes, in some contexts, numbers might *not* be important, or they might *not* be the only way to look at something. But then let's try to understand when they *are* important and when they do, in fact, mean something, depending on context. Numbers naturally appear frequently and, certainly, in varied contexts: in our personal lives and our teaching lives.

For instance, the next time you're at the supermarket, notice how often you compare prices, compare labels for fat grams, compare packages for quantity. Remember when you started thinking about retirement? Understanding interest rates, investment options—dollars—suddenly became important, just as balancing a checkbook once did. When you get your blood pressure checked, you don't accept a vague "it's fine" or "it's a tad high" from a medical professional, do you? No, give me the numbers, doc. And if a loved one, diagnosed with diabetes, tells you that her blood sugars are better or worse or the same, you take the time to learn what those numbers mean, right? If you've ever found pleasure in winning a card game, in your favorite team winning an important playoff game, in your teenager passing the written test to get a driver's license, you've learned that numbers can be fun—and fun to think about. If you've ever argued with a loved one, unable to explain why you're angry except that the other person did such-and-such a number of times or said such-and-such once too often, then you know the power of quantifying behavior in a personal argument.

If numbers can teach us something about our very livelihood in these personal situations, what else could they possibly help us learn? In our daily lives, depending on contexts, numbers inform our health, share our love, express our anger, plan for our futures, and give us pleasure. And, sure, come tax time, they might give us ulcers, but that's not *because* they're numbers—it's the *context* in which we're using them that we loathe.

In the context of our teaching, numbers affect us every day. For those who teach freshman composition, yearly increases or decreases in enrollment might affect our jobs. Retention efforts across the nation focus on increasing the numbers of students who persist to graduation, efforts that affect the students in our classrooms. Those

who serve on committees that attend to issues such as starting salaries, merit pay, graduate admissions, stipends, and hiring decisions need to be sensitive to the numbers involved in those particular contexts. When we talk to students in conferences about how many times they missed a Friday, or how often a certain kind of error appears, or how many journal entries they have yet to do, we use numerical patterns to help us communicate with students, help us understand what to focus on next, and help us determine whose problems are purely academic and whose might be more personal. In peer review sessions, when students notice that a classmate used a certain word six times in one short paragraph, they point it out and quantify it in order to help that student reduce wordiness or redundancy, an important insight in the context of reader response.

If numbers, frequencies, and patterns that can be quantified give us insight on our students' problems, or their written work, or on our professional concerns, what else could they help us learn? Certainly, not all student behaviors can or should be quantified, but we naturally quantify the ones we can as a necessary step toward teaching, toward helping.

We know that those numbers reveal something to us—possibly revealing a story somewhere.