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Composing Research

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8 CONCLUSIONS (AND BEGINNINGS)

What will composition look like in the future if we abandon numerical evidence entirely and tell stories instead? How would we tie all of those stories together, and how, exactly, would we find them useful to our teaching? We might learn one day that our postmodern critique of scientism has resulted not in a new understanding of the role science plays in our culture, but in a chaotic individualism through which we amass a body of scholarship we are ultimately unable to contain, describe, or, in the end, use. How will our field be portrayed to others if constructed of a mass of stories one must be an insider to understand or appreciate—stories we are unable to debate, falsify, or evaluate?¹ And if it takes only one liar to destroy the credibility of us all, how will we continue to *believe* the stories we hear? And to what will we turn when we lose trust—again?

As with most trends in composition, a new one will most likely be just around the corner. Then we will realize that the story can exclude and marginalize some voices, that there are other voices just as valid as the personal, that we need new research to examine broader issues and to put our stories to the test, and that in order to do all of this, we need to be better trained as researchers, armed with a wide range of methods available to us—methods able to answer the wide range of questions we will so naturally raise within so many varied contexts. Storytelling can enhance any kind of inquiry, certainly, but diverse inquiry can aid the power of those stories at the same time, if we do not limit the forms of evidence we seek, the political ideologies we seek to uphold, and the written forms we favor and find pleasing.

As reviewed in chapter one, the new storytelling trend has gained a strong hold on our scholarship, our beliefs, and, most importantly,

our means of justifying those beliefs. However, the current value of storytelling in our field has been enhanced, in part, by arguments that simply devalue the research that relies on numerical evidence. Further, our own history (and desire to escape the remnants of 19th century thought in particular) has added to our quest for something new, something different, as shown in chapter two. Math avoidance and anxiety, the fight against male-dominated science, and a preference for works that are more literary than traditional reports, as illustrated in chapter three, have added fuel to the qualitative/quantitative dichotomy (and dichotomous language) we currently face in our field.

While a theory such as a Contextualist Theory of Epistemic Justification, presented in chapter four, may provide us a lens through which to see our research and our research contexts differently—and to recontextualize a most harmful division among competing theories of epistemology—we must take other active steps in order for our field to fully realize, in practical terms, the value of such a changed vision. After all, our field is currently divided in such a way that an inclusive theory such as a Contextualist Theory of Epistemic Justification cannot be embraced at all unless we first understand how best to open the doors necessary for it to work. Otherwise, such a theory will remain only that—a theory, one that makes sense in our scholarship only.

To apply a Contextualist Theory of Epistemic Justification in a useful, practical manner, the Contextualist Research Paradigm Matrix in chapter four focuses on questions that researchers must ask in the contexts formed by simultaneous and intersecting research issues and rhetorical issues. Such questions, asked honestly from the desire to learn and to share, will help us focus on available means for learning in that context, rather than relying on trends that are merely popular or writing styles that we prefer. The questions in the matrix point to larger issues, such as conducting research that is useful not only to us, but also to our students, and maintaining ethical standards while exploring a research question. Further, the questions in the matrix are deliberately general—to start the process of later, more specific questions that will vary due to context.

The reprint in chapter five of Oliver's (1995) study on rhetorical specification in writing prompts, together with an interview in which she articulated several decisions she made during the process, provides an example of a researcher (and a study) at work within the matrix. Oliver made decisions based on a combination of factors: usefulness to her readers (other teachers), benefits to students in our classrooms, fairness in relation to her data, validation of her own experience. Similarly, chapter six presents the red ink/blue ink study to demonstrate the matrix—the research process—at work as well, though my own decisions in that study, because of a different context, resulted in a product that differs from Oliver's but is no less accurate. Both chapters five and six reveal the complicated processes that guide researchers in the construction of their final products—complicated, varied processes that may result in varied products. Indeed, the final product of any researcher's endeavors, regardless of kind, can ultimately share, in the limited space of a final product, only parts of those processes—processes that a Contextualist Research Paradigm helps reveal.

A contextualist paradigm enables us to systemize that inquiry while still maintaining the flexibility of our multidisciplinary field. In a Contextualist Research Paradigm, one *kind* of research is not automatically more valuable than another, and one *kind* of evidence does not guide our quests. Instead, full attention to the rhetorical tradition that has guided our field from the start *and* full understanding of the processes of research that guide our inquiry converge to provide a new foundation upon which our scholars can see our own research and research questions differently—a vision that can provide stability *and* growth at the same time.

For Phelps (1988), our field had been engaged in the quest for a new genre that would adequately express what we believe about “the personal nature of knowledge,” but in the “meantime, we are seeing hybrid, tortured, mixed, and often unsuccessful discourse forms” (vii). While Phelps did not specify what she meant here, or to what kinds of texts she referred, I recognize my own text as deliberately hybrid and mixed. In my own quest to search not for *a* new genre, but for a new lens through which to see the eclectic forms of knowledge

that inform our work in varied contexts, I could not—as Phelps did—narrow such a quest to a path of theory only. To do so would demand that genre dictate inquiry, not the reverse.

In the context of this inquiry, then—a quest for an inclusive Contextualist Research Paradigm for Rhetoric and Composition—this work produced not one genre of text, but six: 1) I told several stories, of course, as my own personal experiences and conviction guided this quest; 2) I referred to and analyzed theory and research in a traditional, academic manner because theory and research, too, informed the quest; 3) I constructed a mock study for the purposes of demonstrating decision-making and research procedures in a research context; 4) I reprinted Oliver's (1995) study for readers' scrutiny and 5) conducted an interview with Dr. Oliver that also illustrated decision-making in context; and 6) conducted a new pilot study to illustrate the value of research for testing our lore.

Such a hybrid text is not tortured, but is necessary for exploring *and* conveying a new understanding of the eclectic epistemic foundations of our work—as teachers and as researchers. The mix of texts presented here aids our understanding of the context in which our current, too narrow preference for research methods has grown and furthers our understanding by examining reasons for that trend.

Composition's quest to define itself as a discipline has recently resulted in our gravitation toward the narrow path of storytelling in a misguided and unsuccessful attempt to define the field via genre, personal anecdotes, and politics rather than the contexts in which we find ourselves teaching, researching, and asking questions. Our attempt to become a respected academic discipline by simultaneously countering academic tradition has focused our attention on the political, rather than the epistemic, goals of our publications. At the same time, our quest to shed our own history of constructing a mechanical, drill-oriented paradigm that ignored students' voices has led us to an equally limited paradigm focused on our own voices rather than on research that will benefit our students.

Should we stop telling our stories? Absolutely not. We must, in fact, keep telling them in order to create the fullest interplay among various kinds of evidence, but then we must seek that variety, too.

Numbers alone won't reveal everything we need to know. Stories alone can't do it, either. But when researchers stop defining their work by method only—and focus more on the research question in a research context, applying a new contextualist paradigm, understanding that all research methods are, indeed, epistemic—then the full power of any data, be it story or number, will truly blossom into the knowledge our field seeks and the discipline we hope to become.

NOTES

1. For a recent review of the potential for theory to silence debate (and, therefore, silence voices), see Porter (1998), "Methods, Truth, Reasons," *College English*, April 1998.