In his last book, *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, James Berlin talks about the social and political “formations and practices” that are always “involved in the shaping of consciousness, a shaping mediated by language and situated in concrete historical conditions” (1996, 169). Berlin reviews composition research that examines the production of texts within historical and socioeconomic power structures. He then encourages researchers to consider “production-based studies, text-based studies, and culture-as-lived activity studies,” studies “situated within the institution . . . that sponsored the examined activities . . . , [studies that are] related to the ideological—the arena of language, idea, and value” (170).

We as compositionists have been heeding Berlin’s advice by theorizing, analyzing, predicting, and arguing with one another in an ever-increasing number of articles and books. What we have not done as prolifically or as well is to account for the methods we use to generate our predictions and reach our conclusions. We do not always critique the assumptions that drive our research, nor do we publish the data bases that support our empirical studies. As Huberman and Miles note, research reports from the 60s, 70s and early 80s rarely contain enough data for “readers to follow how a researcher got from 3,600 pages of field notes to the final conclusions” (1994, 428). Huberman and Miles repeat their lament for the late 80s and early 90s: “It is still unlikely that a researcher could write a case study from a colleague’s field notes that would be plausibly similar to the original” (1994, 428). Such a state of affairs indicates to me a need for publishing not only our research conclusions but also our justifications for the methodologies we select to reach those conclusions, especially if the methodologies are relatively recent ones as is grounded theory.

Furthermore, a conversation about *how we work* as well as about what we find can help us engage others in a dialogue about composition research. To invite such a dialogue, in the following pages I explain grounded theory and review its application to composition studies. Then I argue two points: (1) we have not made enough progress in developing methodologies that interrogate distinctions between composition theory and the teaching of writing, and (2) we
have not studied our research methodologies as social practices in themselves. I look forward to vigorous response.

**GROUNDED THEORY AS A METHODOLOGY**

In the 1960s, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss developed a systematic methodology for qualitative research and for the “discovery of theory from data” (1967, 1). They called the methodology “grounded theory” because the results of the research are “always traceable to the data that gave rise to them” (Strauss and Corbin 1994, 278). Grounded theory requires the researcher to use a specified set of procedures to code data in a series of passes (open, axial, and selective). Data are examined for dimensions and properties, compared with similar phenomena, regrouped and reconceptualized until a provisional theory emerges inductively from the analysis and is further tested through theoretical sampling. Codes are recorded in code notes, integrative memos, visuals, and balancing matrices. Grounded theory is based on “systematically and intensively analyzing data” not just to order them, but to examine conceptual relationships and to *generate theory*. The theories that result consist of “plausible relationships proposed among concepts and sets of concepts” (Strauss and Corbin 1994, 278). The iterative nature of the methodology leads to findings that are rooted in precise analytic procedures and to theory that is fluid, open, and provisional. Grounded theory produces sophisticated representations of complicated social practices (such as writing and the teaching of writing) while it leaves a paper trail of memos and visuals documenting the researchers’ paths through the data.

Strauss and Corbin stress this point: “Grounded theory methodology insists that no matter how general—how broad in scope or abstract—the theory, it should be developed in that back-and-forth interplay with data that is so central to this methodology” (1994, 282). This “grounding” of theory suggests that the methodology can support composition research that crosses the border between local and general knowledge. Grounded theory also offers a means of meta-analysis across case studies. In addition, grounded theory is excellent for long-term research agendas that aim for a full theory of composition as defined by Richard Fulkerson in his seminal article on the subject.

Of course, grounded theory is not a panacea. The processes of interviewing subjects, collecting data, cycling findings to participants, negotiating meanings, and returning to the data for theoretical sampling are both recursive and intensive. One project can require months and even years to complete. Likewise, grounded theory produces so much data that physically managing them and intellectually manipulating them is difficult even with software programs for assistance. And for researchers (myself included) who were originally trained to be solo interpreters of texts, the methodology requires some epistemological shifts. Grounded theory is best done collaboratively; it is field-based, uses coding systems derived from the social sciences, requires graphic as well as textual reporting of results, and tests theory through negotiation. On
the other hand, grounded theory does not require the researcher to simplify the complex acts of teaching and learning or to choose between description and theory. My experiences with it convince me that grounded theory is a promising methodology for composition studies.

**HOW GROUNDED THEORY IS APPLIED IN COMPOSITION STUDIES**

The ERIC database from 1982–1996 lists twelve entries about grounded theory and writing. All are about perceptions of the subjects under study, e.g., how sixth graders define themselves as readers (Guice 1992), how veteran teachers reconceive the value of dialogue journals when confronted with student responses to the journals (Gross 1992), how a novice researcher redefines herself as she produces a dissertation using grounded theory (White 1992), and how two researchers perceive their collaborative efforts (Smith 1982). Dissertations Abstracts Online lists additional studies that use grounded theory to explore relationships among teacher training, curriculum decisions, and writing instruction (e.g., Pippen 1991; Weitz 1995).

These studies underscore the reflexive nature of grounded theory which forces researchers to remain aware of their situatedness within the methodological paradigm. Grounded theory requires a questioning stance up to the end of a research project and beyond. Those applying the methodology must learn to live without closure.

Another phenomenon that occurs when grounded theory is the prime analytic methodology is the use of multiple data collection and reporting methods. Triangulation in data gathering and creativity in reporting of the findings are logical outcomes of constant comparison and the active search for disconfirming evidence. For example, in her study of peer writing groups, Candace Spigelman combines historical and textual methods with naturalistic methods of data gathering. She uses grounded theory to analyze the whole data base and then reports her findings in a reasoned argument combined with a case study narrative. Spigelman explains her use of grounded theory as both philosophical and pragmatic. She sees it as a systematic method that offers “an important corrective to [her] vested position in the research,” a methodology that lets her move beyond description to “some level of generalization [about] . . . ownership values in writing groups—for which there are, at present, no theoretical claims.” Spigelman believes that “any discussion of educational settings and practices must involve critique and recommendations for change” (1996, 133–34).

In the research seminar that I teach, graduate students apply grounded theory to various “sites and scenes” of writing. For example, one student studied the writing processes of a local author, another analyzed the pedagogies of teachers who are active writers themselves, a third theorized about students who initially fail the Virginia Passport Literacy Test and then pass it after attending special writing classes, a fourth studied how the public perceives educational documents published by an AIDS Task Force, and a fifth analyzed
Department of Defense consultants who write under security-clearance constraints. In these types of studies, researchers use more than one method of data collection (field study and surveys; statistics and classroom observation) and then report their findings in combinations of genres (case study/theoretical statement; feature story/research report; management proposal/narrative).

A Closer Look at One Application

In a recent study of student and faculty perceptions of televised writing instruction, I used grounded theory to investigate how participants are constructed as “students” and “writers” in the virtual and material spaces of a televised composition course, and to theorize about the impact of distance education on composition pedagogy (Magnotto 1996).

Grounded theory allowed me to complicate previous generalizations about the influence of electronic pedagogy on higher education with specific findings about televised writing instruction. Some of my findings follow:

1. Interactive television (ITV) constructs the student as an educational consumer by packaging courses as products to be purchased, presenting the site director as a sales representative for those courses, and using market research to assess satisfaction with products consumed.
2. ITV constructs students as producers as well as consumers. Texts become commodities of value.
3. ITV redefines “presence” and “absence” for students who can be present and absent simultaneously in this medium.
4. ITV creates a virtual, postmodern space in which students can imagine multiple subjectivities, one of which can be a “writerly self.”
5. ITV places intermediaries, filters, screens, and interpreters between the instructor and the student. These mediating elements can both enhance and diminish the construction of students as writers.
6. ITV does not preclude a liberatory pedagogy.

The time between my shaping of the research questions and my writing of the findings was filled with long sessions of recursive data analysis. In the next section of this chapter, I explain grounded theory methodology in more depth and use the television study to detail components of the research paradigm and its appropriateness for situated, local studies of writing and the teaching of composition.

HOW TO DO GROUNDED THEORY

Miles and Huberman, in their landmark volume on data analysis, examine a range of approaches to qualitative research: interpretivism or hermeneutics, ethnography or field research, critical ethnography or action research. The common features across these varied approaches include coding, constant comparison, returning to the field to further test emerging patterns, working
toward a small set of generalizations, and constructing theories to explain the selected phenomena (1994, 9). Grounded theory uses the same strategies. As Glaser and Strauss explained it 30 years ago:

Joint collection, coding, and analysis of data is the underlying operation [in grounded theory]. The generation of theory, coupled with the notion of theory as process, requires that all three operations be done together as much as possible. They should blur and intertwine continually, from the beginning of an investigation to its end. (1967, 43)

Spigelman explains coding procedures by defining them as “numerous intellectual maneuvers for grouping data and for naming the relationships among the groups or categories thus derived. In open coding, data are disassembled and categorized; in axial coding, data are regrouped in terms of their conditions, contexts, and so on; and in selective coding, a kind of ‘story line’ or interpretive frame is created. Finally, a workable theory emerges” (1996, 132–33).

My study of televised instruction serves as an illustration. Data analysis began with sorting and labeling data into types and then applying open coding methods to data sets, starting with my teaching journal, moving to videotapes, and then on to other types of data such as students’ papers. As categories emerged, I further developed them through axial coding, and I wrote coding memos recording each category and examples of it from the data base. I continued to interview students, faculty, and staff associated with the televised course and to ask for their responses to my early categories. I kept a research log as well. As coding memos accrued, I reread them periodically and drafted integrative memos to record salient concepts and issues and to develop the codes that would shape the “story line.” (See Appendix)

Naming Assumptions

All research is based on assumptions. What is critical in grounded theory is the researcher’s obligation to closely examine those assumptions as the research progresses. For example, my work on televised instruction is based on a social constructivist epistemology and on two findings that emerged from a previous study of writing centers: (1) students are rarely constructed as writers in school settings, and (2) when they are constructed as writers, they make progress as writers (Magnotto 1991, 1995). The television study is also based on the assumption that successful writing classes provide a setting in which students can be constructed as writers who produce as well as consume texts. In the final report of a grounded theory, each assumption is explained in detail.

Collecting Data

Most of us who have studied classroom teaching or writing center tutorials have used multiple approaches to data collection, hoping through triangulation to capture some of the complex interactions that occur in settings where
writing/teaching are primary. Data collection methods such as surveys, interviews, talk-aloud protocols, and field notes have been explained quite well in other sources (Denzin and Lincoln 1994; Miles and Huberman 1994).

These methods of collecting data are not easy to carry out, but neither are they mysterious. Data analysis, on the other hand, is slippery. What goes on in the researcher’s mind when she analyzes extensive amounts and varied types of data? How does she actually “do” data analysis?

Analyzing Data

In grounded theory, the three main techniques of data analysis—coding, memoing, and diagraming (drawing visual representations)—require excursions into several sub-routines at the same time that the researcher is continually pushing for integration of all previous analyses. In the final phase, multiple analyses are drawn together to produce new theory, and that theory is disseminated in a research report, the writing of which also plays a critical part in the study. In other words, grounded theory gives writing its due as a knowledge-making process.

The following scenario describes a data analysis session that followed the taping of a writing center conference between a faculty-tutor and a student enrolled in an economics class. The student was working on a paper about John Kenneth Galbraith, and she was thoroughly frustrated by her instructor’s response which was “I stopped reading after the second page because this paper is giving me a headache.” As the researcher, I have before me the audiotape of the conference, the student’s draft, and the student’s and tutor’s responses to my interview questions. How do I incorporate these data with those from the 20 other tutoring sessions I have witnessed?

The first step is to quickly read through the day’s data collection and to listen to the audiotape (using fast forward as often as necessary). I read/listen to get an overview of the event, a holistic sense of the data set. The second step is to reread the data set, jotting notes in the margins as I go along. The third step is to write myself a preliminary, descriptive memo of my responses to this early reading of the data. Most of the memo is a list of notable moments in the data set. “Notable” is operationalized as that which I, with all of my experience in writing centers and as a writing teacher, deem important—things which jump out at me because of, not in spite of, my expertise.

Coding of data is the next procedure and takes place the following day after I have transcribed parts of the audiotape. Open coding, analogous to brainstorming, is the most creative coding. I read the data set word-by-word and line-by-line trying to name concepts that emerge from the reading. For example, when the student says, “I can’t write,” “I’m not good at writing,” and “I hate writing,” I brainstorm a code list which includes: negative attitudes, lack of confidence, learned helplessness, deliberate self-effacement to gain sympathy, ploy to get tutor to write paper, writing resistance—and as many additional concepts as I can think of to name what might be happening.
Open coding serves as a springboard to later analysis because even though I begin with the student’s words, I also play around with hypothetical codes and questions that address larger issues. I’m not worried about some of the codes being far-fetched because later analytical procedures will require ample empirical evidence if a concept name is to survive additional rounds of analysis.

In my next work session, I pick some of the most promising concepts developed through open coding for a closer look called axial coding. Axial coding forces me to examine each concept in terms of conditions, interactions among actors, strategies, tactics, and consequences. For example, when “negative attitude toward writing” seems to hold up as a concept, I reexamine the data base for information about the conditions surrounding similar statements of negative attitude, for interactions between students and tutors when negative attitudes are voiced, for strategies students use to convey attitudes, and for consequences of voicing attitudes (Does the tutor take a different tact? Does the talk turn to affective matters rather than rhetorical ones?). I am examining relationships across and within concepts, making concepts denser, giving them more texture to see if they hold up as conceptual codes or have to be dropped. Eventually, this close examination helps me determine the important dimensions of the concepts that will become core categories.

In selective coding I systematically and deliberately go through the full data base looking not only for additional examples of core categories but also for examples that defy core categories.

All the while that I am doing various types of coding, I am generating and refining my hypotheses, and I am recording these hypotheses and syntheses in coding memos that I write to myself and to other team members if the research is collaborative. In addition to memos, I am drawing visuals—diagrams, matrixes, tables, and graphs—to capture the current state of the analysis and to use as heuristics for further analysis.

At periodic intervals during data analysis I confer with others about the “fit” of my emerging findings. For instance, I play the audiotape of the conference on the Galbraith essay to three writing tutors as they follow along on the transcript. We then discuss the tape, and I ask for their responses to the core categories.

Writing the research report draws the analysis to a close. It is important to note that in grounded theory, the act of writing is considered part of analysis, not a separate “translation” of the logic, proofs, or warrants of prior activities. Often the memos written earlier will become significant sections of the report just as the act of putting findings into words is part of the research itself.

LIMITATIONS

Naturalistic research methods in all their various guises share similar limitations as Denzin and Lincoln and Miles and Huberman, among others, point out. But the need for situated studies of writers remains strong (Broadhead and Freed 1986), and to achieve such studies, composition researchers continue to
import naturalistic methodologies from other disciplines (ethnography from anthropology, discourse analysis from linguistics, case studies from education). Given the hybrid sources of naturalistic methods, it is not surprising that some of the same compositionists who represent themselves as proponents of naturalistic research still seem conflicted about choosing naturalistic approaches over experimental or rhetorical ones. For example, even though “time” is a component of all these methodologies, Broadhead and Freed lament the two years it took to complete their naturalistic study of the writing processes of management consultants. They also voice their reservations about coding methods that produce non-quantifiable results and suggest that future researchers change the method:

Interviews with writers should be more structured, so that more information can be accumulated earlier to guide coding and subsequent analysis of texts. At the same time, single texts should be coded by several researchers working independently, so that the coding (and hence the analysis) can depend less on decision by consensus and more on decision by quantifiable measures. Finally, a greater number of texts and writers should be analyzed, so that statistical tests of reliability may be applied to the apparent similarities and differences. (1986, 127)

If naturalistic researchers take these injunctions to heart, I contend they risk building their studies on a methodological house of cards. At the base of Broadhead and Freed’s complaint is the lack of generalizability of case studies. To make this point, they say that Nancy Sommers’ conclusion that writers revise recursively rather than in a process of stages is only applicable in certain contexts. Broadhead and Freed find that management consultants may revise quite successfully by using a more or less linear process rather than a recursive one. In other words, they find that the local writing situation critiques theory, yet it is long-term, situated research (such as case studies) that accounts for local writing situations. Broadhead and Freed are up against the powerful scientific research paradigm which valorizes generalizability more than it does local knowledge. Grounded theory is a possible solution to this dilemma because it works for formal theory building as well as for substantive theory building. That is to say, a researcher can apply grounded theory to several case studies and use those studies as the empirical basis for a meta-analysis across cases.

WHY GROUNDED THEORY?

I begin this section with two claims: (1) we as compositionists have not made enough progress in developing methodologies that interrupt the theory/practice binary, and (2) we have not studied our research methodologies as social practices in themselves.

The Theory/Practice Distinction

To address the first claim, let me point to the characteristics of grounded theory that contribute to its usefulness to both theory and practice. For one,
the methodology is inclusive. The team approach provides opportunities for
those individuals who describe their primary work as teaching and for those
individuals who describe their primary work as research to collaborate on pro-
jects. Likewise, the team approach extends easily to include graduate assistants
and others who wish to theorize about their practice. Second, grounded theory
is interpretive. It was developed to study scenes of complex human interaction
(pain treatments in hospitals, for example). The methodology encourages
multiple mind-sets, yet is rigorous because each stance is interrogated by other
stances. The analyses that survive are never simplistic. Third, the methodology
is dialogic. It works through consensus and negotiation. As team members
move through the recursive cycles of data analysis and theory building, they
interrupt (and thus inform) one another (see Silverman and Torode 1980).
Finally, the methodology is proactive in intent. As Patti Lather reminds us,
research should lead toward emancipatory knowledge and purposeful change.
Grounded theory develops agents for change through the inclusion of partici-
pant-researchers, and it opens up spaces for action and reciprocity.

Grounded theory “explains” and “predicts” and thus is useful for practition-
ers. It goes beyond description and is recursive in nature. Additional data can be
used to enrich the explanatory power of a particular grounded theory.
Furthermore, as Glaser and Strauss note, “the form in which the theory is pre-
sented can be independent of this process by which it was generated. Grounded
theory can be presented either as a well-codified set of propositions or in a run-
ing theoretical discussion, using conceptual categories and their properties.”
(1967, 31) Glaser and Strauss choose to emphasize “theory as process; that is,
theory as an ever-developing entity, not as a perfected product.” (32)

Grounded theory is, itself, a critical research practice with the potential to
help compositionists work the borderlands between scholarship and teaching. It
is open and ongoing as a research methodology, and the written reports pro-
duced during and after a grounded theory study are also open and ongoing. One
memo is absorbed into the next; a ‘completed’ visual becomes a heuristic for the
next visual. A published research report doesn’t necessarily signal the end of the
project. Glaser and Strauss in their study, Time for Dying, state the following:

The discusssional form of formulating theory gives a feeling of “ever-developing”
to the theory, allows it to become quite rich, complex, and dense, and makes its
fit and relevance easy to comprehend. On the other hand, to state a theory in
propositional form, except perhaps for a few scattered core propositions, would
make it less complex, dense, and rich, and more laborious to read. It would also
tend by implications to "freeze" the theory instead of giving the feeling of a need
for continued development. (qtd in Strauss 1987, 264)

Methodology as Social Practice

My second claim is that we as compositionists have not studied our
research methods as social practices in themselves. Our methodologies too
often remain traditional, patriarchal, and exclusionary. We tout composition as a democratic discipline, but we maintain a researcher-practitioner hierarchy that can be seen in the marginalization of teacher-researchers and graduate students. We continue to reward the solo researcher over the collaborative one. And, we continue to send researchers into the field to study “subjects” as “objects.” Nowadays, of course, we describe and quote our “subjects” in our research reports, but we rarely invite our subjects to join us as researchers. In contrast, grounded theory is self-consciously critical. Through triangulation, analytic recursiveness, and inclusion of subjects as agents, it invites others into our disciplinary conversations. As an empirical and naturalistic methodology, it offers us a timely opportunity—a means of grounding our theory in our practice.

In their preface to *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Glaser and Strauss point to “the embarrassing gap between theory and empirical research,” a gap which has been addressed from the research side of the chasm by “improvement of methods for testing theory” (1967, vii). However, not much progress has been made from the “theory side.” Glaser and Strauss define grounded theory as “the discovery of theory from data.” They claim it works by “provid[ing] us with relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations and applications” (1967, 1). In contrast, logically deduced theory comes from *a priori* assumptions that may or may not be based in empirical research and thus may have less “fit” and “working capacity” to explain things to expert researchers and practitioners:

> [O]ne canon for judging the usefulness of a theory is how it was generated . . . . other canons for assessing a theory, such as logical consistency, clarity, parsimony, density, scope, integration, as well as its fit and its ability to work, are also significantly dependent on how the theory was generated. They are not, as some theorists of a logico-deductive persuasion would claim, completely independent of the processes of generation. This notion of independence too often ends up being taken as a license to generate theory from any source—happenstance, fantasy, dream life, common sense, or conjecture—and then dress it up as a bit of logical deduction. (1967, 6–7)

Grounded theory promotes the teasing out of political and social components affecting writing/teaching. It does not require the hiding or demoting of certain features to make points about other features. As conditions such as gender or power or technology claim a place in a researcher’s agenda, grounded theory is able to incorporate their impact because the analytic procedures require asking “What is power [or gender or ethnicity] in this situation and under [what] specified conditions? How is it manifested, by whom, when, where, how, with what consequences (and for whom or what)?” (Strauss and Corbin, “Grounded” 276). As an added feature, research reports that make use of balancing matrices allow the researcher to display multiple factors and conditions so that readers can view complex relationships simultaneously.
CONCLUSION

Whenever I read the memos and logs generated by researchers using grounded theory, I am struck by how these texts blur the line between doing research and writing up research. The practice of grounded theory is a stunning example of the fusion of thought and language. It forces the researcher to create connections from the investigative scene to the interpretation of that scene, but more importantly, it forces the researcher to document those connections. As composition matures as a discipline, this state of meta-analysis seems ideal. It promises to interrogate the distinctions between theory and practice that limit our current ways of understanding the complex human activities of writing and teaching writing. It makes us accountable to ourselves, to the writers and teachers we study, and to our field.

NOTES

1. Glaser and Strauss (1967) explain these techniques, but Lincoln and Guba (1985) operationalize them in a series of steps that are "user-friendly." See also Strauss and Corbin (1990).
2. For an update on the advantages and disadvantages of software programs that store and sort data, see Richards and Richards (1994).

APPENDIX:
INTEGRATIVE MEMO: ACCULTURATION TO MEDIATION OF DISTANCE

As I start to reread the early memos and to think about my conversations with JB and H, I realize the following things come between the instructor and the student in TT. They are like sliding screens:
the camera,
the elmo,
the site director,
the crew,
the mail room people,
the tv screen which reduces my size and the size of my words,
the transmission mechanism which may make my voice fuzzy or intermittent.
the desk I sit behind
the raised dais
the microphone I wear and the ones students use
material delivery thru the mail—I don’t physically hand out papers nor do students return them directly to me
voice mail and email conferences versus face-to-face copy center—if they don’t get the course pack and syllabus together the way you want it or don’t get it to sites on time (do they mail it?), or even the way they put the faculty member’s name in small print on the cover, gives them a roll as intermediary

One consequence of these intermediaries is the highs/lows I felt after (and before) each class. Another consequence is distance (it makes sense that this is called distance learning). How far apart are students and I? Time distance, physical (spatial) distance, emotional distance, intellectual distance.

Again, these things are related to how students are constructed as students by the distance ed system which now shapes them as much as an individual teacher does. The distance system becomes the virtual as well as the material institution within which we shape and are shaped as teachers/learners/etc.

My sheer force of will and my belief that students learn partially because of who I am changes on TT because I am as virtual as my students are!! I can’t look students in the eye (JB saying that’s why he refuses to teach on TT). Thus, if the force of my “self” (including my experience, my knowledge, my credentials, my people skills) is dissipated by these intervening screens, how will I motivate students to learn? Do I give up on motivation? Are the students in TT self-motivated (there may be a difference between studio and site students in this regard)? Will the material do it? (Probably not in a junior level required course). I will go back and look at evals for TT 327 and classroom 327.

Does this say a lot about my assumptions for teaching writing—the coach metaphor, mentor metaphor, or editor metaphor imply a “personal” relationship between two people (actually between 2 stable individuals). Maybe TT is the postmodern answer to fractured selves. Whatever the cause, the consequence is a learning curve that is very noticeable. The virtual/material dichotomy needs to be deconstructed. We know one by virtue of there being the other. Is this a continuum? It seems to be, especially since the concepts of virtual and material are themselves socially constructed.