REVIEW:
Expanding Borders and Forging New Paths: Perspectives on Writing Research

Amy Dayton and Jennie Vaughn


For over twenty-five years, both seasoned and emerging scholars have relied on a few established guides to composition research. Perhaps the best known are Janice Lauer and J. Williams Asher’s Composition Research, Stephen North’s The Making of Knowledge in Composition, and Gesa Kirsch and Patricia Sullivan’s Methods and Methodology in Composition Research. Since the publication of these key texts, most subsequent research guides have focused on particular methods (such as qualitative, case study, or historical research) rather than providing a broad overview of modes of inquiry.

Now, two new collections present an updated look at research in the field. The volumes, Writing Studies Research in Practice (hereafter WSRIP) and The Changing of Knowledge in Composition (hereafter CKC), both seek to revise previous texts, offering an overview of the methodological landscape rather than focusing exclusively on one mode of inquiry. As the title indicates, Lance Massey and Richard Gebhardt’s

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collection is a contemporary reconsideration of North’s 1987 text; Lee Nickoson and Mary Sheridan’s volume is an update of Kirsch and Sullivan’s 1992 collection. These new texts address current issues in writing studies research and point toward the discipline’s future, drawing somewhat different conclusions about the state of the field. Although both books revisit previous texts, these collections are likely to serve as complements to their predecessors, not replacements.

**Overview**

To begin, it may be helpful to define three often-confused concepts: *method*, *practice*, and *methodology*. As Nickoson and Sheridan put it, methods are “what researchers do” while practices are “how they do it.” Methodologies constitute “the whys of research,” or “the epistemological and theoretical interests” that undergird a researcher’s understanding and interpretation (2). Nickoson and Sheridan remind readers that without the *why*, the *how* and *what* will not make much sense. In the first chapter of CKC, Edward White cautions that our research claims must always be consistent with what our methods suggest is possible or not possible. For White, this is one of the central insights of North’s book, a guideline that still informs sound scholarship.

In contrast to White’s positive evaluation of North’s book, Lynn Bloom, in part one of CKC, warns that researchers today would do well to avoid what she calls the “scorched-earth” approach used by North (33). For the most part, the subsequent CKC chapters avoid offering strenuous criticism of previous studies (perhaps fearing the backlash that North received), but they do revisit the modes of inquiry that North’s book covers—including teacher research, philosophical inquiry, and historical research, among other methodologies. Many of the chapters give the sense of a field whose paradigm is shifting. In her chapter in CKC, “Making Knowledge, Shaping History,” Erica Frisicaro-Pawlowski notes that historical research is one area where disciplinary changes are most noticeable. Rather than producing generalized accounts of composition’s history, today’s scholars are focusing on particular, local sites where people have come together to read and write for various goals, including the civic and the political. The impulse to trace these community histories reflects a burgeoning interest in the uses of literacy outside of the classroom.

The second part of CKC deals with the place of writing in the contemporary university, looking, for instance, at the role of teacher research and at institutional changes such as the growth of university writing centers and the emergence of independent writing programs and majors. The essays in part three of the book look ahead to the future of composition studies, in part by examining publication trends in our most widely read journals, in chapters by Kristine Hansen, Brad Lucas, and Drew Loewe. Of particular interest in this section is David Smit’s piece, which identifies a scholarly project unique to composition studies—what Smit calls “a continuation
of the essayistic scholarly tradition applied to student texts” (220). His essay echoes the book’s assertion that despite the years that have passed since the publication of North’s text, our field is still searching for a common paradigm, research agenda, pedagogical philosophy, and professional identity.

In contrast to this claim, Nickoson and Sheridan’s book offers a portrait of an established field that is more stable, and less in flux. Aimed at both new and experienced researchers, *WSRIP* is a comprehensive, practical guide for researchers, graduate students, and instructors of methods courses (4). The text is divided into three sections: “Reimagining Traditional Research Practices,” “Revisioning Research in Composition,” and “Reconceptualizing Methodologies and Sites of Inquiry.” The first two sections focus on traditional modes (ethnography, narrative, historiography, and so on) and sites of writing research. The third section moves beyond traditional methodologies to new issues and new sites of inquiry. With a focus on ethics, mixed methods, and interdisciplinary study, the essays provide a broad overview of contemporary scholarship while offering specific strategies for conducting research.

**Sites of Change in Composition Studies**

Overall, the books present very different pictures of our field. In their introduction, Massey and Gebhardt acknowledge that some scholars are dismissive of the kind of meta-criticism that their book offers. In response to these objections, the editors assert the value of work that examines the state of the field, addressing questions such as these: What is composition studies? What are the challenges and trends shaping our discipline today? How might we address those challenges as we look ahead to the next half-century of research and teaching? The book’s contributors see one of those challenges as the lack of a stable paradigm. At the time *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* was published, composition-rhetoric was still seeking a fixed identity, drawing on methodologies from other fields in order to legitimize itself. The essays in *CKC* depict composition studies as a field still in search of its identity, beset by changes that complicate the task of envisioning future directions. In contrast to Massey and Gebhardt’s book, the contributors to Nickoson and Sheridan’s volume present a vision of a field that is more established in its use of well-developed methods and methodologies. The essays in *WSRIP* suggest that writing studies is no longer just borrowing methodologies from other disciplines. Rather, we have refined methodologies and adapted them to suit the unique nature of writing research.

Despite the differences in the two collections, there are some similarities as well. Collectively, the essays point to the ways in which composition has expanded its boundaries in the last twenty-five years, moving from a narrow research agenda focusing on classroom writing to one that is broadly interested in the role of literacy in schools and communities. This broadening of scope, from composition studies
to what we now more commonly call “writing studies,” has led to some shifts in approaches to research.

One shift has been the evolution of a more nuanced understanding of the politicized context of the work that we do. In his chapter in *CKC*, “Rhetoric, Racism, and the Remaking of Knowledge-Making in Composition,” Victor Villanueva argues that one of the most significant changes in composition research has been the recognition that empirical methods are also rhetorical, and that narrative, poetics, and other modes—such as autobiography and auto-ethnography—have an important place in our scholarship. This social constructivist view of the limits of empiricism, as well as a more expansive notion of what counts as evidence, can be traced in large part to the contributions of women scholars and writers of color. Like Villanueva, Kristine Blair and Asao Inoue, in their chapters in *WSRIP*, explore the impact of race and gender in writing research. In “A Complicated Geometry: Triangulating Feminism, Activism, and Technological Literacy,” Blair argues that investigations of digital literacy are best served by the use of a feminist and activist framework. In this framework, researchers are expected not to maintain a veneer of objectivity, but rather to take an active role in promoting critical literacy and in helping women and girls to become more empowered readers and writers. In a similar vein, Inoue argues that an assumption of neutrality has prevented writing researchers from identifying and correcting racial biases in writing assessment.

As the field has matured, we have begun formalizing and synthesizing modes of research that may have been less systematic and less clearly defined in the past. One of those categories is institutional research. In his essay in *WSRIP*, “Writing Program Research: Three Analytic Axes,” Douglas Hesse offers new ways of thinking about the uses of program research. Writing in the same volume, Steve Lamos suggests several methods for conducting what he calls “institutional critique”: work that seeks to “analyze and reform” the “discursive and material practices of institutional activity” (158). This emphasis on institutional research may be a result of the changing nature of university writing instruction as many universities create independent composition programs, writing departments, and writing majors. In his essay in *CKC*, “On the Place of Writing in Higher Education (and Why It Doesn’t Include Composition),” North notes that composition as we know it may decline in influence or cease to exist entirely, in favor of writing across the curriculum and writing in the disciplines (WAC/WID) classes or upper-division courses for self-selected students. Conversely, Smit argues that it is not necessary for writing studies to separate from traditional English departments in order to maintain vibrant research agendas and innovative programs.

As research expands beyond the borders of English and writing departments, it is also expanding beyond the borders of the North American university. In her chapter in *WSRIP*, “Conducting Research Internationally,” Karen Lunsford identifies...
international research as a major “turn” in twenty-first-century writing studies (221). Lunsford borrows from sociology, offering social-network analysis as a methodology for international research. She calls for scholars to assume the role of “information broker” and to move beyond disciplinary boundaries (222). International writing studies research requires a consciousness of differences in terminology, assumptions, perspectives, and contexts across educational systems.

As we begin to formalize our methods and develop analytic categories specific to our field, we establish what Christina Haas, Pamela Takayoshi, and Brandon Carr call “homegrown methods” for writing studies research (WSRIP 60). In their chapter “Analytic Strategies, Competent Inquiries, and Methodological Tensions in the Study of Writing,” they present one such model—a “linguistic-based discourse analysis” of fieldwork data on literacy, which they used to study instant messaging among college students (52). Haas, Takayoshi, and Carr maintain that homegrown or project-specific methods can come from mixing research traditions and engaging in purposeful reflection—two hallmarks of research in writing studies. In their chapter in WSRIP, “Exceeding the Bounds of the Interview: Feminism, Mediation, Narrative, and Conversations about Digital Literacy,” Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher present the “life history” method that they used for their study of digital literacy in American lives. In this method, researchers and their subjects collaborate in conducting the interview and in analyzing and publishing the results of the study. The “life history” approach, Selfe and Hawisher argue, raises questions such as these: Who owns the information resulting from interviews, and at what stage in the process? How is knowledge produced, and by whom?

If changes in methodology raise new ethical questions for researchers, so, too, do changes in technology. Heidi McKee and James Porter address some of these changes in their chapter in WSRIP, “The Ethics of Conducting Writing Research on the Internet: How Heuristics Help.” As they point out, research involving the Internet and other digital technologies raises new questions about the definitions of “public,” “private,” “text,” and “living person,” and about how and when to obtain informed consent (245). Researchers working with digital technologies may find McKee and Porter’s heuristics helpful as we consider the ethical ramifications of our research (though our IRB processes may or may not align with these heuristics).

Although these two collections document some important changes in writing studies research, they also demonstrate that the field’s core research mission—that of better understanding and improving the teaching of writing—is still at the heart of much of our scholarship. For this reason, both volumes emphasize the importance of praxis and a commitment to producing research that informs classroom work—what Matthew Jackson calls “embodied art in practice” (CKC 162). By whatever name, teacher research (also called action research or practitioner inquiry) remains a vital (and highly contested) mode of research. In WSRIP, Nickoson argues that teacher
research projects may be conducted beyond the walls of the classroom, while still directly shaping classroom teaching. She calls for a multimethodological, collaborative approach to teacher research so that we may learn not only “about” our students but “from” them as well (111).

Ultimately, these two books continue the tradition begun in Lauer and Asher’s, North’s, and Kirsch and Sullivan’s texts: that of setting out the predominant modes of writing studies research. The books also point to the ways in which our methodological choices are ideological choices. As Stephen North argued in *The Making of Knowledge* and Edward White re-affirms in the opening chapter of *CKC*, our methodologies represent philosophies about what is good and not good, what is measurable and not measurable. The challenge for new and established researchers, then, is to choose methods that fit our research questions and our philosophies. In this new era of writing studies, however, we need not be confined by narrow methods or strict philosophical boundaries. Indeed, these collections point us toward the collapsing of boundaries and the possibilities of homegrown, mixed-method inquiries. As Bob Broad puts it in his essay in *WSRIP*, “Strategies and Passions in Empirical Qualitative Research,” we may need to blur the boundaries between kinds of researchers while maintaining a clear sense of the boundaries of “the kinds of data and [. . .] analyses that lie at the heart of our research projects” (199). We can acknowledge that our methodological choices are not rationalistic nor purely objective—and in fact, they do not need to be—but they must be well suited to the questions that we want to pursue. Those questions will lead us to conclusions that other scholars can then refine or reconsider, as they make their own strategic choices about methods, methodologies, and practices of research.

**Works Cited**

