

**Getting Nowhere: Confronting the Methodological Debate in Composition Research**

Amy Irene Flick

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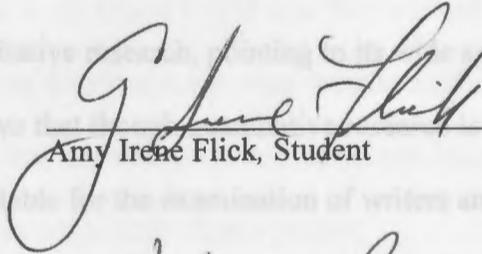
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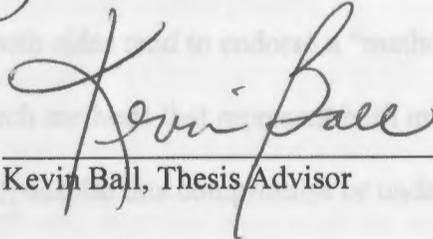
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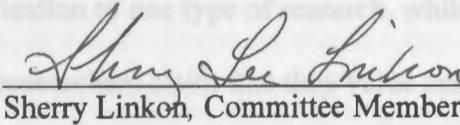
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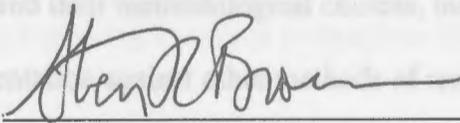
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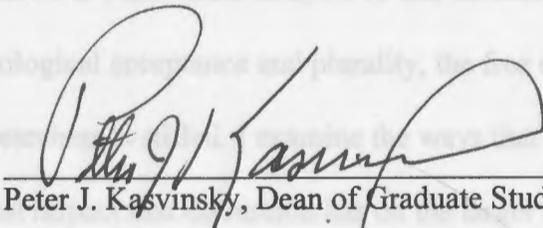
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## Abstract

For many years scholars in composition and rhetoric debated the benefits, limitations, and appropriateness of the various methods used in research. It was important for scholars to both adhere to a paradigm that fit the examination of writing and created knowledge that was credible and generalizable. Some researchers strongly advocate the use of quantitative research, pointing to its wide spread academic use and acceptance. Others believe that though quantitative research is certainly useful, qualitative methods are more suitable for the examination of writers and writing communities. Today, researchers on both sides tend to endorse a “methodological pluralism” or an acceptance of diverse research methods that represent both major research models.

However, despite this compromise or understanding, many researchers still promote the utilization of one type of research, while marginalizing other types of work. In other words, researchers claim that they value and benefit from this plurality, yet in their zeal to defend their methodological choices, many tend employ derisive and negative argumentation against other methods of research.

What follows is a rhetorical analysis of this discussion. I contend that in using a trope of methodological acceptance and plurality, the free exchange of ideas among composition researchers is stifled. I examine the ways that scholars discuss types of research and what impact that discussion has on the larger research community in composition and rhetoric.

## Acknowledgements

It would not have been possible for me to complete this project if not for the patience, support, and encouragement of my thesis advisor, Dr. Kevin Ball. I don't think that I could ever fully express how much of an impact he has had on me as a student, as a writer, and as a teacher. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Brown and Dr. Linkon for always inspiring me and challenging me. I am so appreciative of each of my committee members for their ideas and insights, and also for the time that they dedicated to helping me with this project.

I would also like to thank my parents, Glenna and Kevin, and my siblings Megan and Justin for always being there for me and for always supporting me. I would also like to thank my boyfriend Scott for living with me, my countless books, and what I'm sure can only be described as my perpetually sunny disposition for the past year. Lastly, I'd like to thank my friends Athena and George for their valuable advice and ideas and for their unwavering support as I worked to complete this thesis.

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the other. And ultimately, many argued for the disciplinary support of model over the other.

I will not be doing this here. I won't advocate one type of research over the other. First of all, I believe after twenty years of discussion, everything that can be said in favor or against either paradigm has been said. More importantly though, I think that both are essential, as they produce different kinds of knowledge that work synergistically to further our holistic understanding of the dynamics involved in the writing classroom and help us as instructors to enhance its overall effectiveness. My position is not unique. In fact most composition scholars and researchers have written similar statements in their own texts. Unfortunately, despite making these statements, many compositionists still engage in a methodological debate of sorts as they still seek support for their preferred research model, while reflexively reiterating the weaknesses or perceived weaknesses of other research models and subtly attacking their efficacy. The goal of this text is to reveal this trope and explore the ways in which it is limiting the free-flow of knowledge in composition and preventing the discipline as a whole from truly benefiting from its "methodological pluralism" (Kirch 247).

## Introduction

Many texts have been published on research methodologies in composition and rhetoric. Some are handbooks to aid new researchers in creating their own research design and completing their data analysis. Others have focused more on finding a research model or set of methodologies that best fit researcher and disciplinary needs. Scholars examined and debated at length the strengths and limitations of both qualitative and quantitative research. They explored the implications of doing one type of work over the other. And ultimately, many argued for the disciplinary support of model over the other.

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When I began my research, I thought that composition and rhetoric had already moved beyond methodological debates and had reached a point where methodological plurality was fairly well established. This pluralism was, in my mind very evident. A range of diverse research methods were represented in composition texts. I believed then that most scholars and researchers not only accepted the utilization of varied methods, but encouraged it. And most scholars claim to do just that. They state very clearly that there is value in using both quantitative and qualitative methods. However, as I did my research, I began to see a pattern emerging, in which writers began their discussion of research methods with some sort of statement of paradigmatic neutrality, and then as they continued their discussion, expressed a clear preference for one research method, while critically evaluating the abilities and tenets of the other. It is this critical evaluation of other methods that is most troubling as it indicates a kind of disapproval or marginalization of the work produced through those methods.

As explained above, researchers argued for years over the superiority of their paradigm as well as the inferiority or shortcomings of the other. Over time though, both qualitative research and quantitative research methods came to be widely used and represented in composition and the debate seemed to subside with researchers outwardly embracing this plurality. That said, to find this trope, which seems to undermine the idea of methodological pluralism, was both surprising and a little disappointing. It signified that after more than twenty years of debate, people are still rather resistant to the kinds of knowledge created by methodologies in which they do not personally engage.

In chapter 1, I chronicle the evolution of composition research from its beginnings in empiricism to the assertion of qualitative efficacy to the current trope advocating the

use of multiple research methodologies. I demonstrate through textual analysis the underlying themes of trivialization and negative argumentation employed by both qualitative and quantitative researchers in their discussion of “opposing” methodologies.

In Chapter 2, I look at the evolving or, perhaps devolving, role of empirical research in composition studies. In composition and rhetoric’s disciplinary beginnings, these research methodologies were seen as superior somehow and their use was subsequently strongly supported. However, with the emergence of qualitative research in composition, the use of quantitative methodologies has fallen out of favor to some extent. I look closely at this shift and the rhetoric surrounding empiricism’s changing role in composition, discussing it in relation to the marginalization of this paradigm.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I focus my attention on qualitative research, or as it is often termed “experiential research.” More specifically, I show how the reflective examination of the personal experience can be developed to create strong teacher- research and ethnography in the composition classroom and also used independently as an anecdote to build community and facilitate dialogue among instructors and students. Although all three types of work have been used extensively for some time, the definitions and specific components and purposes of each, are often hazy as they are too generally grouped together. Subsequently, certain types of qualitative research are discussed in ways that are sometimes marginalizing.

To reiterate, I am not arguing for the individual engagement of multiple research methodologies. I am arguing for a more lucid awareness of the ways that methodological issues are discussed. The purpose here is to illuminate issues regarding the ways in which composition research is judged and received by the other researchers and scholars in this

discipline. But perhaps the most important goal here is to illustrate the stifling effects of this trope and encourage a different kind of rhetoric that confronts methodological issues

and paves the way for a real shift in attitudes toward "methodological pluralism" in composition research.

In the 1960's composition and rhetoric was just beginning to achieve some level of disciplinary definition. The field of study was, after many years usually being recognized as a separate entity within the broader field of "English." The issue of research or rather, how research was to be conducted was a major part of this process as the research methodologies decided upon would decide how scholars would go about building a base of knowledge about the teaching and learning of writing. Scholars have struggled to some degree to reconcile the conceptions of academic research with the work that was already being done. Many solutions have been proposed, but none have been universally satisfactory. Unable or perhaps unwilling to settle on one method or one set of methods, composition researchers have engaged in research methodologies that suit their own personal purposes, preferences, and beliefs. Consequently, composition research has come to encompass a variety of methods that represent both qualitative and quantitative paradigms, resulting in a wealth of rich information about writers, writing instruction, teaching techniques, and writing relationships.

However, despite how much the field has benefited from this "methodological pluralism," many scholars still advocate the disciplinary use of one model of research over others. It is important to state that this advocacy is not merely indicative of methodological preference on the part of a researcher. Rather the advocacy that I am discussing here is the overt or subtle call for one type of research to be held in a higher regard than others and furthermore, it includes an attack on the effectiveness and credibility of these other forms of research.

## Chapter 1: Competing Paradigms

In the 1960's composition and rhetoric was just beginning to achieve some level of disciplinary definition. The field of study was, after many years finally being recognized as a separate entity within the broader field of "English." The issue of research or rather, how research was to be conducted was a major part of this process as the research methodologies decided upon would decide how scholars would go about building a base of knowledge about the teaching and learning of writing. Scholars have struggled to some degree to reconcile the conceptions of academic research with the work that was already being done. Many solutions have been proposed, but none have been universally satisfactory. Unable or perhaps unwilling to settle on one method or one set of methods, composition researchers have engaged in research methodologies that suit their own personal purposes, preferences, and beliefs. Consequently, composition research has come to encompass a variety of methods that represent both qualitative and quantitative paradigms, resulting in a wealth of rich information about writers, writing instruction, teaching techniques, and writing relationships.

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Throughout much of the 1980's and early nineties, researchers were openly critical of the research methods that conflicted with their beliefs about research and unapologetically argued the superiority of their research methods over others. They would do this by both presenting the benefits of their model and by systematically attacking the efficacy and methodological soundness and applicability of other research methods. Ellen Barton, a composition scholar, explains, "When researchers justify their methodologies, they use both positive and negative argumentation" (401). Both components were a standard part of the discussion regarding methodological choices. So the position of the researcher was made very clear to audiences, despite the fact that it further divided researchers along methodological lines.

However, more recently researchers scholars have ceased to be so explicit. Perhaps they began to see the discussion as futile. Perhaps they began to question the larger impact of such divisiveness and negativity on the composition research community. Regardless, researchers began to adopt an attitude of neutrality toward methodological choices. Where "negative argumentation" (Barton 401) used to exist, there is now a statement expressing the importance of all research methods and a hesitance or outright refusal to advocate the use one or the other or to value the use of one over another. However, subtly embedded in these newer texts, there often still exists a message that not only still promotes one type of research, but, more notably, still judges and devalues others. It is merely hidden behind a trope of pseudo acceptance designed to shroud an author's opposition to research methods that do not match her own.

In this chapter I explore the history and the evolution of the research paradigm debate in composition. I discuss how the field has viewed each research model, the

quantitative and qualitative, and how each came to be research staples in this discipline. I specifically look at how attitudes, often divisive attitudes, towards these various research models have changed, and more importantly, how they have stayed the same. I will show how despite the oft repeated claims to the contrary, scholars of composition and rhetoric are still trying to attach a sense of superiority and authority to their respective research methodologies.

For years, there was strong academic partiality toward the positivistic approach to research. In fact, in many disciplines, this type of work is still encouraged. Several key ideas define this type of research, but at its core is a strong emphasis on researcher objectivity: the belief that the researcher's involvement or bias should not affect the gathering or analysis of data. Michael Myers explains, "Positivists generally assume that reality is objectively given and can be described by measurable properties, which are independent of the observer (researcher) and his or her instruments" (1). Researcher objectivity and detachment is considered paramount to ensure the credibility of a piece of research. This idea has been so strongly ingrained in academic research that even after the rigidity of pure positivist ideologies diminished, the belief in the effectiveness of objective research continued to be upheld in many academic disciplines. Many, in fact, still maintain that objectivity will yield the most reliable results. Robert R. Pagano, a professor who specializes experimental design and statistical analysis, echoes this sentiment: "Scientific methodology has a built-in safeguard for assuring that truth assertions of any sort about reality must conform to what is proven to be objectively true about the phenomena before the assertions are given the status of scientific truth" (5). In other words, without objectivity truths, or scientific truths, can not really be discovered.

Although this research model was, and still is to some degree, used extensively in academic research, many of the social sciences (i.e. anthropology, sociology, humanistic psychology...etc) developed and utilized other forms of research that do not adhere to the same guidelines central to quantitative research. Rather, these social science researchers looked for ways to answer different types of questions, questions about people and cultures and communities that can only really be answered through direct interaction with research subjects and observation. This type of work, qualitative research, placed a stronger emphasis on creating thick, rich descriptions of research subjects and gaining a deeper understanding of smaller groups of people. Michael Quinn Patton, a leading scholar on qualitative research, clarifies this distinction between the two forms of research:

Qualitative methods facilitate study of issues of depth and detail.

Approaching fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis contributes to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry. Quantitative methods on the other hand, require the use of standardized measures so that the varying perspectives and experiences of people can be fit into a limited number of predetermined response categories to which numbers are assigned. (14)

Qualitative researchers work at generating case studies, analyzing naturally occurring conversations, facilitating interviews and focus groups, and observing subjects to really gain insights into their research community. Researchers often even take part, alongside their subjects, in the activities they are studying. They engage in the material they are examining. There is no real sense of, nor need for, the detachment valued by quantitative

research. In a very real way, qualitative researchers strive not only to gain knowledge *about* their subjects' lives and cultures, but they strive to create knowledge *with* them. Researcher involvement then is seen as something that enriches the work, not hinder it.

While this work has been done extensively in anthropology and sociology, many researchers were simply not comfortable with the idea of using of qualitative research as an alternate form of research. They doubted the credibility of its results, as there are no "scientific standards" in place to ensure internal or external validity or reliability, two positivist standards that are in place to protect the soundness of a research design and the scientific credibility of the results. Validity refers to a generalizable truth (Silverman 34). Reliability questions the reproducibility of a study and its results (Woolfolk 530). The idea behind these standards is simple really: If the work and the outcomes can be repeated over and over and applied to different groups of people, then they must be accurate. These standards ensure or are meant to ensure that the results are not situational and can be used to assist in further data collection. Clearly, these ideals cannot always be applied to qualitative research, as this type of work specifically aims to examine the situational. The findings uncovered by qualitative studies are very specific to the people, places, times, and contexts of the research and it may not, and often does not, apply to other situations in the same way. As Patton explains, "By contrast, qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people and cases. This increases the depth of understanding of the cases and a situation studied but reduces generalizability" (14). As a result of not meeting these standards, some argue that qualitative research is anecdotal, and therefore is less authoritative than empirically based research.

Some researchers, however, claim that qualitative work can meet those same expectations or standards for scientific rigor. Other researchers see no reason why qualitative research should even strive to meet standards that were designed to suit positivistic and quantitative work. They believe that those principles are not applicable to qualitative methodologies. They contend instead that qualitative inquiry requires a separate set of standards that suit designed to fit its purposes and methodologies. Lincoln and Guba, well known qualitative researchers and scholars, in particular, have disagreed with the employment of quantitative measures and principles to evaluate qualitative research. They outlined a new set of criteria to judge qualitative research. Morse et al summarize Lincoln and Guba's proposed evaluative measures:

In seminal work in the 1980s, Guba and Lincoln substituted reliability and validity with the parallel concept of "trustworthiness," containing four aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Within these were specific methodological strategies for demonstrating qualitative rigor, such as the audit trail, member checks when coding, categorizing, or confirming results with participants, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, structural corroboration, and referential material adequacy (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Guba & Lincoln, 1982). (1)

These were new ways for qualitative researchers to judge their own work and the work of their peers. These standards fit qualitative research as opposed to forcing qualitative research to meet externally imposed standards. It is important to point out that Lincoln and Guba's criteria is not universally accepted or followed, but their argument highlights

the obvious differences between qualitative and quantitative research. Each paradigm has different goals, creates different types of knowledge, and has different methods of conducting research and gaining insights, so it would logically follow that each would have its own set of research standards. In other words, Lincoln and Guba highlighted the differences between the two models and challenged the need for and applicability of the positivistic standards of reliability and validity and even objectivity in qualitative research, and asserted, or rather emphasized, the idea that qualitative research is separate and autonomous, and not merely an extension of empiricism. This is a significant claim, as many believe that the sacrifice or absence of objectivity in research is indicative of flawed or impotent results. So to say that objectivity is in some ways unimportant to research, is to essentially challenge academic perceptions of research as a whole.

Needless to say, this suggestion was not eagerly accepted. Wendy Bishop, an advocate of ethnographic research, explains, "Ethnographers, practitioners of a subjective process, have had to fight hard for prestige in academic communities that valorize the objective stance," (*Ethnographic* 16).

That fight has, in many ways, paid off. Over the years, qualitative research has developed and taken its place in the many academic disciplines. Certain disciplines and individual researchers of course still have research preferences, but for the most part nobody seems willing to completely dismiss qualitative research either. Its methods are accepted and widely utilized. As is stated above, its use is particularly dominant in the humanities and in disciplines like anthropology, sociology, and humanist psychology. It is also used in business, medical research, social work, and the list goes on. But for my

purposes here, I would like to focus on how qualitative research has helped to shape a significant amount of research and knowledge in composition and rhetoric.

As composition and rhetoric was beginning to take shape, leading scholars were originally very resistant to qualitative research, as it was at that point not as widely used or accepted. At that time, they felt that an experimental or empirical approach was a more effective and reputable way of conducting research in the new discipline. In what Stephen M. North, a compositionist, calls “the charter of modern Composition,” (17), Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer proclaimed in fairly explicit terms that as composition takes its place in academia, it must define itself largely, if not entirely, with experimental research. Their book *Research in Written Composition*, published in 1963, was the end result of an in-depth analysis and evaluation of composition research as it was at that point. After reviewing the inadequacies of early or pre-disciplinary, composition research, Braddock et al along with a special NCTE committee, suggested a move to empiricist research standards. They wrote, “The committee [Executive Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English] further decided to use only research employing ‘scientific methods,’ like controlled experimentation and textual analysis (1). Although they did not dismiss other research methods, they chose to promote a quantitative research paradigm. They solidified this position by choosing to several quantitative studies as exemplars of “the most soundly based studies” (6), in contemporary composition research. They went on then to describe the construction of the studies, dissecting them into researchable variables and frequency counts. They felt that in producing quantifiable research, composition could attain a sort

of scientific grounding, and therefore could grow and be recognized as a serious and independently functioning academic discipline.

It was only in the 1980's that composition began to really view qualitative work as a viable research option. Before that time, most researchers were still adhering to the findings of Braddock et al. and operating under the assumption that composition research should, ideally, be quantitative and largely positivistic in nature. Then, in 1981, Kenneth Kantor, Dan Kirby, and Judith Goetz, compositionists and composition researchers, published an article called "Research in Context: Ethnographic Studies in English Education," which highlighted the benefits of utilizing a more humanistic approach to composition research. They explain, "Theorists argue that since experimental design derives from the natural and agricultural sciences, it is less appropriate to the study of educational phenomena than methodology developed from the investigation of human behavior in social settings" (305). This was a significant claim. At the very least it questioned composition's "core" research standards, which were primarily empirical or, as Kantor et al calls it here, "experimental design." Kantor et al proposed instead that composition work with an ethnographic method of research.

Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland, and Lyn Lofland, well-known ethnographers, define ethnography, as being "grounded in a commitment to the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting on the basis of though not exclusively by) participant observation" (4). This work relies heavily on the experience of the researcher. He or she observes and interacts with subjects in the research setting while at the same time studying them and trying to gain a better understanding of them. Beverly Moss, a compositionist and ethnographer, explains this in

her discussion of ethnography: "Ultimately, ethnography allowed me to be a part of the research project in more than some abstract 'researcher' way. It allowed me to take pictures of the community (through fieldwork) and be in the picture at the same time, something that other research methods frown upon" (154). So instead of striving for objectivity, ethnographers feel that they benefit from and their research is made stronger through immersion and looking at their research community up close.

Although ethnography was a sharp departure from the traditional, quantitative methods long advocated by compositionists, it seemed to capable of opening new doors to researchers, as it very easily lends itself to examinations of the writing classroom and various other writing environments. Ethnography enables researchers to study the problems and processes of students in a natural setting. Moreover, by using ethnography, researchers are able to ask different kinds of questions about the composition classroom. They can look at specific occurrences, relationships and interaction in the classroom, and other variables that have a very real impact on the development of writing skills, but cannot be quantified, controlled, or isolated for examination.

Many read the Kantor article as a call to action, telling researchers to go engage in research methods, qualitative research methods, which up until that point had been ignored or discouraged. North explains it was "a sort of rallying cry aimed at mustering what it can from past investigations under the banner of 'ethnographic studies,' hoping to both promote a greater understanding of the work, and perhaps more important, to foster more of it." It could be argued, though, that more important than instigating ethnographic research, Kantor et al. brought attention to ethnography. They brought it to the attention of other composition researchers, highlighting a way to create different kinds of

knowledge about the ways in which writing is taught, learned, used, and perceived. In short, they got people talking about ethnography and thinking of how it could enhance their work and, therefore, inspired a willingness to broaden composition's research base.

Since the Kantor et al. publication, the field composition has amassed countless ethnographies and created devout followers of qualitative studies. In 1983 Shirley Brice Heath published her now famous book, *Ways with Words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*, in which she used ethnography to examine the language development of underprivileged students from two different towns. She observed how the students spoke and were spoken to in their homes and in their community. She then contrasted these observations with an examination of the more "mainstream" language patterns governing the students' educational settings. Through this work, Brice Heath was able to show how student development and achievement is impacted by the different between the two.

In another seminal work, Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater conducted an ethnographic investigation of the academic and personal writing habits of college students. In her book *Academic Literacies: The Public and Private Discourse of University Students*, Chiseri-Strater charts the progress and development of two students as they move from a creative writing course into other academic settings within their respective majors. Using detailed observations and one-on-one interviews, Chiseri-Strater shows the many personal and academic pressures that affect student writing.

Lastly, Bishop, who has become one of the biggest proponents for ethnographic research in composition, used ethnography in her 1987 dissertation. She observed the learning and teaching styles of five doctoral students as they studied the teaching of

writing and then went on to construct their own writing courses. She sought to depict the experiences of each of her subjects and, in doing so, give insight into how new composition teachers are influenced and, in turn, evolve. Throughout the rest of her life, Bishop continued her work with ethnography to promote its value, comprehensibility, and subsequent use. She believed that ethnography was not only an effective method of research, but also that it could enhance the ways that instructors understand and conduct their classes. She wrote, "Ethnographic writing research can improve your teaching, deepen your understanding of writers, and encourage you to 'read' educational settings more critically and more carefully" (*Ethnographic* 180).

While these ethnographies are just a few of the better known in composition studies, there have been many others as well. They have helped to shape composition and rhetoric as a discipline, creating a body of knowledge that may have been inaccessible through other research means. Their impact has also paved the way for new researchers to not only conduct studies rooted in qualitative methods, but also to have that research recognized and accepted by the larger composition community.

Despite the work being done in with ethnography, some researchers were still unwilling to acknowledge qualitative research as a potentially independent form of research or even as a real form of research. North in particular had major problems accepting the legitimacy of ethnographic research. In his book *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field*, he voiced strong reservations about ethnography's ineffectiveness in creating generalizations in the field, problematic dissemination, and inability to be reproduced for research comparison. He basically dismissed ethnography altogether saying, "With no single paradigmatic reality to close in

on, the phenomenologically- based Ethnographers are essentially in the business of collecting multiple versions of what is *held* to be real by the people they investigate” (279). In no way does North see ethnographic research as a respectable or useful way of building knowledge in composition. More troubling, he does not seem to even see ethnography as research. Instead, he dismissively refers to ethnography, as “stories,” “fictions,” and expressions of “imaginative universes” (277- 278).

Janice M. Lauer and J. William Asher, scholars on composition research, also voice a refusal to accept ethnography as a primary form of research in their 1988 book, *Composition Research: Empirical Designs*. They actually go as far as to chastise scholars for using ethnography and qualitative research as a whole, at best viewing it as a sort of research generating technique and, at worst, insinuating that is irresponsible and misleading. They write, “Qualitative research has a limited ability to generalize to other samples, variables, and conditions like the ones studied. In composition research, sometimes readers who do not have strong empirical research backgrounds interpret the results of qualitative research as definitive rather than as exploratory and generative of hypotheses,” (48). In their opinion, ethnography could even be considered research. It was merely in place to stimulate research questions or foci. However, the questions themselves needed to be answered with “real” or “formal” research. Lauer and Asher’s clearly believe that real research is experimental and quantitative as they explain, “descriptive studies must move such observations [ethnography or case study] into coding or quantifying” (19). In other words, until ethnography can be conducted quantitatively, it must be viewed as secondary or supplemental.

Despite these detractors, researchers continued to engage in ethnography and other qualitative research methods, helping qualitative research to gain more ground. At the same time, some of the more dogmatic positivist ideologies began to recede. Subsequently, by the early 1990's, scholars were no longer overtly rejecting the value of qualitative data as a whole or as an autonomous research paradigm. Rather, in their discussion of research methods or methodological issues, researchers began to use an advocacy of their own perspectives and techniques coupled with a much subtler argument against qualitative research models. Still, the argument for the acknowledgement of the superiority of quantitative research was clearly present in the text. So despite the outward appearance of a more positive attitude toward descriptive research, many still viewed it as a less reliable, less effective strain of research. Even those who had come to value qualitative or descriptive research still viewed the evaluative dependability of results yielded through experimental methods as superior. In his essay, Richard Beach, a compositionist, exemplifies this idea as he, on one hand, expresses an appreciation for qualitative research, or as he calls it, "descriptive research," and, on the other, explains how the results or findings tied to such research are not as strong as those produced by quantitative methodologies. He writes:

Empirical research is also useful because it can be replicated with some degree of consistency. By replicating studies of the effects of grammar instruction on writing ability and generating a consistent pattern of results, researchers may develop some degree of confidence in arguing that, for example, grammar instruction has little effect on improving writing

quality. The fact that researchers can achieve the same results with different populations further strengthens the validity of those results. (221) It is important to note that Beach went on to commend the work of "descriptive empirical research" (221). Unlike Lauer and Asher, he recognizes the value of descriptive work. At the same time though, he implies that empirical (experimental) research is superior as it can produce generalizable truths and the research can be recreated. In other words, Beach simply reiterates an old argument: If qualitative research cannot meet the "scientific" standards of validity and reliability, then it is less effective. Furthermore, Beach offers no explanation as to how or even if descriptive research could produce "valid results." He simply leaves the audience with the idea that although qualitative research is good and useful in its own right, its findings are not as authoritative as those produced by quantitative studies.

This debate over the utilization of quantitative or qualitative research methods continued for most of the eighties and early nineties. Quantitative researchers continually argued the "scientism" and generalizability of their work. Qualitative researchers reiterated Kantor et al's argument that quantitative research methods were not appropriate tools in studying the composition classroom. The negative argumentation toward each research model got to such a point that some researchers feared that was restricting research and hurting the discipline of composition and rhetoric as a whole. Ellen Barton, a compositionist, states, "I argue against the use of negative methodological arguments, warning that such argumentation threatens to limit the field" (400). In using a combative rhetoric to systematically attack the work of an entire paradigm, composition researchers

were essentially closing themselves off to all of the knowledge and insights garnered through its methods.

More recently, scholars have replaced this blatant negative argumentation against other forms of research with a much subtler form of criticism. Many researchers now preface their texts on methodologies with statements that categorically denied the very idea that one form of research was inherently better than the others. They make it seem as though there really is no disciplinary division about research methods at all. By using this kind of language or this trope, scholars have been able to both promote their methodological perspectives and undermine others without the appearance of a methodological debate or attack. Susan MacDonald Peck, a compositionist, illustrates this trope in her essay "Voices of Research: Methodological Choices of a Disciplinary Community," writing, "My focus will not be on the truth or falsehood of research findings derived from one methodology rather than another or on the ultimate goals of different methodological choices, but on some of the key implications methodological choices have for us as a disciplinary field" (111). Even more forthright in her assertion of neutrality, Cindy Johaneck, in her book *Composing Research: A Contextualist Paradigm for Rhetoric and Composition*, promises, "In no manner will I argue that 'quantitative' or 'qualitative' methods are always better" (2). She then explains that the utilization of certain research methods over others must be decided within the context of a person's particular research question.

In her book *Ethnographic Writing Research*, Bishop simply states, "Ethnographic approaches and methods are not *in service of*, but are *equal to* [other research paradigms]" (5). Unlike the others, Bishop does not make a statement of impartiality. She

is not denying a personal affiliation with a particular kind of research. But like the others, she does assert equality among research models. I could go on, as countless articles, books, and essays begin in much the same manner. Everyone seems to be saying that we as a research community and academic discipline value all forms of research. They seem to be saying that we have reached a point where we can recognize the effectiveness of using “methodological pluralism” as a way of enriching our body of knowledge about the teaching and practice of writing.

If this trope was indicative of a real acceptance of the full range of research methods used in composition and a real commitment to judging a piece of research on its own merits as opposed to its affiliation with qualitative or quantitative research methods, there would really be no further need for discussion on the topic of competing research paradigms. Coexistence would have replaced competition. However, the composition community is still discussing research methods and, despite statements to the contrary, researchers are still passing disparaging, often trivializing, judgments on research methods that do not mirror their own personal methodological preferences and beliefs. After essentially stating that there would not be a central discussion about one type of research being better or worse than the others, Peck MacDonald’s essay “Voices of Research: Methodological Choices of a Disciplinary Community,” went on to argue that “humanist” research is actually ruining the field of composition. She states, “Compositionists’ recent calls for more personal voices, more voices of our ‘subjects,’ more activist research, more subversion of dominant academic styles, and more empowerment of those whose writing we study in the end look like a form of disciplinary identity crisis or a form of anti-intellectualism long familiar in American society,” (Peck-

Macdonald 123). Although she clearly claims at the beginning of her essay that she is not going to argue one method over another, Peck-MacDonald does exactly that. She wrote this essay in an attempt to get composition researchers to abandon qualitative or “humanist” research in favor of work that would enhance composition’s “disciplinarity” among the social sciences. She is absolutely asserting that qualitative research is a less effective, less reputable, form of research.

Johanek, too, after assuring readers of her methodological impartiality, goes on to fairly aggressively argue the methodological superiority of quantitative data. Though not as blatant in her disdain for qualitative research as Peck MacDonald, Johanek subtly belittles the use of qualitative methodologies throughout her text. One quickly gets the sense that despite her assertions to the contrary, she is most definitely partial to quantitative research. More importantly, it becomes clear that in addition to favoring quantitative research, Johanek also discusses qualitative research in a way that is both demeaning and overly general. In the very first chapter of her book she begins attacking the ethnographic methodologies used in teacher-research. She writes, of an NCTE call for papers that called for teachers’ experiences in the classroom, “Such attention to participant observation and to reflection on our experiences drew, I’m sure, numerous insightful anecdotes and observations from our teaching at the 1998 convention” (9). It is important to note her use of the term “participant-observation.” This is a method of research that, as explained above, is heavily relied upon in qualitative research. It involves researchers not only observing a community, but also interacting with it as a way of gathering data. Because it aids researchers in really understanding a particular culture, it is a very effective method of study. Johanek insinuates that participant-

observation yields anecdotes, not research. Also in using the term anecdote, a term used to describe basic teaching narratives or stories from the classroom, Johaneck, like North before her, is likening ethnographic research to “stories.” Furthermore, by discussing participant observation in this manner she is essentially discounting any work that utilizes it, which is the bulk of qualitative work.

If one continues to examine the text closely, it becomes even more apparent that Johaneck feels qualitative work is generally less than. She writes:

Perhaps through our quest for more research, not only is ‘qualitative’ disparaged, but systematic rigorous ‘quantitative’ research seems to be less available, too, as we opt instead for the personalized anecdotal evidence we gain through experience. Rigorous ethnographies and case studies, though qualitative in nature, seem to be losing ground along with the quantitative- losing ground to the simpler, more diverse, more personal story or anecdote. (9)

She claims here that qualitative research is not being taken seriously, but her concern is clearly that “systematic rigorous ‘quantitative’ research” is being made inaccessible. In that statement, she makes no reference to qualitative research being rigorous. In fact, she actually seems to make special allowances for ethnographies and case studies that *are* detailed and meticulously done, saying, “though they are qualitative in nature, [they] seem to be losing ground” (Johaneck 9). The word ‘though’ implies that she thinks these ethnographies and case studies are rigorous, in spite of the fact that they are pieces of qualitative research. She seems then to be saying that ethnographies and case studies can be thorough, despite the general ineffectiveness of qualitative research. If Johaneck

thought that qualitative research were equal to quantitative research, she would not feel the need to make these sorts of qualifying statements about qualitative research.

Furthermore, Johaneck contradicts herself, as she claims to accept ethnography, while mocking research methodologies that rely on the utilization of the personal experience as data. Ethnography, regardless of its rigor, depends, at least to some extent, on the researcher experience. The two concepts are not mutually exclusive. In this discussion, Johaneck is grouping all research, all work, which relies on experience together. This is a mistake as the personal experience is used very differently in ethnography and the anecdote. The former uses it as a small piece of data in conjunction with other data and as a part of a larger research study, while the latter uses it as a subject for a teaching story or narrative. However, she does not make this distinction and, in failing to do so, oversimplifies and diminishes the effectiveness of qualitative work as a whole. Moreover, that she is so contemptuous of the personal experience at first and, then, as an afterthought adds a disclaimer of sorts about "rigorous" ethnography being overshadowed alongside quantitative studies, is very telling of her personal position on research methodologies. Johaneck is not as neutral as she would have her readers believe her to be. On the contrary, she is very clearly asserting the value of quantitative research over other forms.

Later in that same chapter Johaneck becomes even more openly aggressive toward qualitative research. She writes:

The rift between 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' research has not only resulted in a near-abandonment of research that seeks and analyzes numerical data, but it also has divided us further into the more private

world of personal stories. Which such stories can always help illuminate our work and give meaning to our theory, research, and practice, they alone cannot be the primary knowledge-making vehicle that defines our field. (11)

This statement again marginalizes qualitative research, which relies heavily on personal experience as data. Johanek laments the “near-abandonment” of statistical data analysis, but makes no mention of how these new “anecdotal” research methods impact qualitative research. More to the point, Johanek still does not differentiate qualitative research from these “anecdotes.” This statement is also very reminiscent of the argument made by Lauer and Asher 13 years earlier. Johanek, like Lauer and Asher, is claiming that certain qualitative methods are merely in place to enhance “real” research. And, like Beach before her, she does not explore ways in which this research can stand on its own.

Although Bishop does not exert any claims of personal methodological neutrality, she does suggest that the research paradigms are equal to one another. However, Bishop’s work indicates belief that ethnography is actually more of a replacement for the older, more positivist, research than an alternative to it. In her book *Ethnographic Research Strategies: Writing It Down, Writing It Up, and Reading It*, Bishop discusses composition research in a very linear way. She explains that from the 1960’s- 1980’s, composition research was dominated by cognitive and experimental research (7-11). Then during the 1980’s-1990’s, researchers began to turn to ethnography. Bishop titled this section of her book “The Move to Ethnographic Approaches: The 1980’s and 1990’s.” It is important to note the word “move” here. The implication seems to be that in beginning to use ethnography, composition researchers stopped using experimental research

methodologies. Aside from a short note about Linda Flower using quantitative research in conjunction with her ethnographic studies (*Ethnographic* 5), Bishop never really discusses what role quantitative methods play in today's research or might play in today's research. This omission is problematic in that it ignores the quantitative work that is still being done in composition. She makes it seem like a dated process, one that researchers no longer rely on. That is simply not the case. Even today, quantitative methodologies are utilized in composition research both alone and in conjunction with other methods. The presence of quantitative research has never disappeared from composition studies.

Furthermore, Bishop has expressed a complete disinterest in quantitative research. In her essay, "A Rhetoric of Teacher-Talk: Or How to Make More Out of Lore," she describes an encounter with empirical research in a composition journal: "This essay engages me because the title 'Empiricism Is Not a Four-Letter Word' is provocative-promising some humor and irony on a seemingly humorless topic (empirical research). However, the essay quickly ceases to invite me- despite it being an essay I 'should read' (Teacher Talk 222). She then says that she quit reading the article and moved on to a more personal essay. She explains, "...the author evacuated prose (empirical report echoing) prose, leads me to leave the journal on the nearby kitchen table" (222). Despite her professional interest in composition research and its methodologies, Bishop could not even bring herself to read the article about the use of quantitative methods. It simply did not interest her and therefore she paid it little attention.

It is clear that Bishop has a strong methodological preference for ethnography. She is interested in and concerned with the development and promotion of knowledge created by qualitative work. That's fine. But her dismissal of quantitative research

techniques is troubling, as it indicates a disregard for the value of other research methods and the knowledge that those methods produce. In other words, she need not engage in quantitative research, but it is unnecessary to discuss it in such a trivializing and flippant way. She can explore ethnography and justify her research decisions without being derisive toward the work of other researchers. That she, as well as Johaneck and the others, continue to engage in this argument illustrates how this trope has prevented researchers from really supporting a methodologically pluralistic discipline.

It is my contention that despite the widely used rhetoric asserting approval and encouragement for all forms of composition research, many in the composition community are, like Johaneck and Bishop, divided along methodological lines. People of course people have methodological preferences. Some support the use of quantitative and experimental techniques. Others are devoted solely to the use of an ethnographic or qualitative approach. What is problematic, however, is the fact that, regardless of words to the contrary, many in the research community of composition and rhetoric consistently denigrate forms of research that differ from their own methodological preferences.

In the next chapter, I continue my paradigmatic examination, turning my attention to quantitative research and its changing role in composition research. Empirical research at one point was assumed to be the stronger, superior methodology in composition research. However, as time passed and more and more composition researchers engaged qualitative methodologies, that preference or favor seemed to fade. Moreover, qualitative researchers began to subtly question the value of quantitative research in composition. These doubts coupled with the overwhelming focus and promotion of qualitative research has forced advocates of quantitative research to defend its position and defend its efficacy

in composition studies. I look closely at how this evolution happened, how it illustrates Chapter 2: (IIa) Asserting the Efficacy of Quantitative Research in Composition certain attitudes in composition research, and what it has meant to composition studies.

### Introduction

Very early on in composition research, quantitative or empirical methodologies were advocated by leading compositionists. As discussed briefly in chapter 1, Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schreyer, along with the NCTE Committee on the State of Knowledge about Composition, made the decision in 1963 that composition research should be carried out using only "scientific methods" (1). They were drawn to these methodologies because quantification and experimentalism promised a structure and reliability in research, which up to that point had been missing in composition research. Furthermore, at a time when the field of composition and rhetoric was trying to gain disciplinary recognition and approval, it was a safe to deploy a research model that had already been a mainstay in the larger academic community for several decades (Noth 141).

Since that time quantitative research has been a major part of composition and rhetoric. These methods have been instrumental in building a disciplinary body of knowledge about the teaching of writing. That influence is undeniable. However, over the past twenty years or so compositionists have also come to embrace other research methods, supporting "methodological pluralism" in composition studies. The field as a whole has come to reject the dogmatic belief that only one kind of research is "real" or capable of producing real knowledge about the teaching of writing. In addition to the more traditional empirical work, qualitative research, such as ethnographies, case studies, and teacher research, represents some of the most influential work being done in composition research today. Contemporary composition researchers have come to believe

## Chapter 2: (Re) Asserting the Efficacy of Quantitative Research in Composition

### Introduction

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that the inclusion of both qualitative and quantitative research methods helps to encourage a richer, broader range of knowledge.

Ideally, in a pluralistic discipline, the inclusion of a new research model would mean more choices for researchers, not the abandonment or marginalization of previously utilized methodologies. The old and new methodologies would simply coexist. However, the inclusion of qualitative research has, in many ways, challenged the role of quantitative research in composition. While many researchers still prefer to create knowledge through empiricism, others have come to personally reject it, preferring instead to utilize the more experiential methodologies. More importantly, some proponents of qualitative research have gone as far as to question the value of empirical research in composition studies. After Kantor et al, in their article "Research in Context: Ethnographic Studies in English Education," suggested that a more humanist approach to composition research would be more appropriate than empiricism, many others began to make similar claims. Some qualitative researchers contended, and still do, that the writing classroom cannot be dissected into isolated variables and quantified. In other words, these detractors essentially doubt the ability of quantitative research to give any real insight into the writing classroom at all. Furthermore, quantitative research is demonized as being cold and stogy. This kind of negative argumentation against empiricism has had a very real limiting effect on quantitative research in composition, forcing quantitative researchers to defend and reassert the usefulness of their paradigm in composition and rhetoric.

In this chapter I look at how the role of quantitative research has changed over the course of the passed several decades. I will show how empiricism, once thought in

composition and rhetoric to be methodologically superior, has been somewhat marginalized and overshadowed by the promotion and dominant interest in qualitative and even anecdotal research. Moreover, I show how this has had a limiting effect on the discipline of composition research and its goals of methodological plurality.

### **Historical Overview of Quantitative Research in Composition**

In the early 1960's, composition, the discipline as it is known today, was only beginning to take shape. Until that point, composition was simply a part of the larger English department, a part that was often systematically overshadowed by literary studies. North writes of this: "One obvious irony, then, was that while in the academy- in the English departments that were to stand as primary authorities on what English was- literature, and not composition or language, was then and remains the central concern" (13). English departments put resources, energy, and emphasis on literary studies and in a way ignored composition and linguistics. At the very least, composition and linguistics were not the primary concern of English departments. This began to change in the late 1950' with the academic reform movement, which called for English Departments to strengthen each area of study, not just literature. North explains, "In effect, then, the academic reform movement demanded the existence of in all three legs of the tripod [literature, composition, and linguistics]" (13). So all three areas of English, not just literature, needed to be strong. As a result of this movement composition began to develop into its own autonomous course of study.

Despite being somewhat neglected academically, work had been done in the areas of writing and rhetoric. But the research lacked regularity. In their text *Research in Written Composition*, Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd- Jones, and Lowell Schoer assert

that the work done in early composition studies was very raw and often unsophisticated. They write, "Today's research in composition, taken as a whole, may be compared to chemical research as it emerged from the period of alchemy: some terms are being defined usefully, a number of procedures are being refined, but the field as a whole is laced with dreams, prejudices, and makeshift operations" (5). They felt that the concept, construction, and goals of research in composition needed to be more clearly defined. They contend, "If researchers wish to give it [composition research] strength and depth, they must reexamine critically the structure and techniques of their studies" (5-6). As discussed briefly in chapter 1, they believed, more directly, that composition research could achieve this "strength and depth" through the use of quantitative or empirical research. This ideology was not surprising as quantitative research was widely relied upon in academic research at that time. North explains, "It should surprise no one that the Experimental method has provided the basis for the oldest and, in terms of numbers of investigations, largest of Composition's Researcher communities. After all it had been the dominant mode of formal educational research in this country over the past 75 years or so" (141). In using these methodologies then, composition and the knowledge it's research produced would be readily accepted in the social sciences and the larger area of educational research.

For the next twenty years, researchers in composition complied with the findings and recommendations of the NCTE committee. Researchers used quantitative methods in their research, successfully creating knowledge about the products, processes, and variables that affect writers. Although countless pieces of research have been produced using these methods, a few of the most well-known are Janet Emig's *Composing*

*Processes of Twelfth Graders*, which is, as the title would suggest, an examination of factors that affect student composition, and Linda Flower and John R. Hayes "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing," which outlines an empirically-based methodology to study a writer's thought process. These pieces helped to shape much of the composition research during the late 1970's and early 1980's. Moreover, they are still discussed and referred to by contemporary composition researchers, further proving the real magnitude of their impact.

### **Another Option**

Despite the work of researchers like Flower, Hayes, and Emig and the disciplinary avocation of empiricism, some composition scholars felt that empiricism and the overall commitment to using quantitative research methods limited their ability to examine the writing classroom in a meaningful way. Subsequently, some began to look for alternatives. As was discussed at length in chapter 1, Kantor's article was the first to really openly question the use of quantitative research in composition and suggest the use of ethnography in its place. However, it was not the last. Just as Kantor et al's article inspired ethnographic research, it also raised concerns over the role of quantitative research in composition. Soon after the article's publication, other scholars and researchers began to systematically attack the efficacy of empiricism in composition and rhetoric.

At first these detractors really just echoed and expanded upon the Kantor et al argument, essentially claiming that empiricism was ill-suited for composition research and incapable of examining the writing classroom. Ralph F. Voss, a compositionist,

perhaps explains this position best in his article "Composition and the Empirical Imperative." He writes:

There is that about writing which is essentially vitalistic, having to do with aesthetics, creativity, talent, memory, or genius. More precisely, there is that about writing which brings to bear a host of writer options, including rhetorical choice (this analogy, that statistic, or what order things will be in, or how their relationship will be established); stylistic prerogative (the skillfully-placed fragment, the carefully-marshaled parallelism, the subordination of a clause); selective use of long-term memory (this historical incident, that personal experience, a particular character or symbol in a work of literature); and other analysis-and-decision situations related to audience and purpose. These matters are functions of the writer's intellect interacting with experience and they come into play at both conscious and subconscious levels. Such matters are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to bring under the kind of scrutiny which will give us *reliable* information in the best scientific tradition. (6)

The claim then was not necessarily that quantitative research was inherently flawed or inept. It was simply that many of the factors that have an impact on the teaching and learning of writing could not be studied using empirical means.

Robert J. Connors, a composition historian, addressed this issue as well in his article "Composition Studies and Science." In it, he, like Voss, expresses a respect for scientific or empiricist research methods, but has reservations about the applicability of those methods to composition research. He contends that quantitative or "scientific"

research is incompatible with the goals of teachers and composition research as a whole. He argues, "The scientific aims of description, explanation, and prediction are simply not the same aims (though some of the terms may be similar) that teachers have. Scientific research and the activity of teaching are simply not commensurable" (7). Although, Connors goes on to say that quantitative research should continue and is necessary in composition, the rest of his article seems to support the idea that quantitative research cannot be applied to the composition classroom. At the very least, Connors seems to not advocate empirical research as a primary research methodology.

Michael Holzman, a compositionist, in his article "Scientism and Sentence Combining," also seems to reiterate Connor's concerns about the incongruity of scientism and the classroom. He writes, "To be guided only by the quantifiable in the choices of measures, especially to be guided by the apparently easily quantifiable, is an error in the transfer of methodologies from the natural to the social and human sciences" (75). He states perhaps even more clearly than Connor that quantifiable research has a definite place and purpose, but that it cannot be a primary research model in composition research.

Voss went even further in his article, expanding on his claim that empiricism is not appropriate for composition and expressing serious doubt as to whether it is even possible to do real quantitative research in composition. He contends:

Science enjoys a cachet unmatched by any other type of study in our society, a cachet deservedly earned in the laboratory sciences, but not in the social sciences. I mean no slight of social sciences here, but want only to remind that research methodology in the social sciences is not empirical

in any strict sense and therefore not capable of generating the kind of objective and precise resultant knowledge possible in the laboratory sciences. And the “science-based” research in composition studies has derived from social science. Research on the composing processes of students, particularly protocol analysis, is based upon case-study methodology from psychology. (5-6)

He is stating that even when compositionists thought that they were creating empirically based knowledge in composition, they were not. He goes on to prove his point by looking at several pieces of “empirical” work, including Emig’s *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*, and pointing out how, even in their attempts to be objective and scientific, these researchers interacted too closely with the research community, thus compromising the positivist standard of objectivity. Voss clarifies, “Trying not to intervene, however, is not the same as avoiding actual intervention. The case-study situation itself, the tape recorder, and the unnatural business of “composing aloud” create contextual variables that make empirical objectivity in any “pure science” sense impossible” (7). Like Connors before him, Voss seems to be saying that the writing classroom is not naturally conducive to empirical research. However, Voss is much more rigid in his beliefs, stating with some conviction that there is no rationale supporting the utilization of quantitative research in composition and rhetoric and furthermore, that given the nature of the composition classroom it cannot be done.

More recent critiques of quantitative research have included similar claims. Additionally, critics of quantitative research have begun to simply make empiricism seem boring, outdated, and even oppressive. As was discussed in chapter 1, Bishop discusses

quantitative research in this way, trivializing it as being uninteresting even to a composition researcher. Barton, in her analysis of negative methodological argumentation, points to an even more troubling example of this kind of rhetoric in an essay, "Dealing with Data," by Cheri L. Williams. While explaining the benefits of doing qualitative research, Williams writes, "The researchers develop an interactive, dialogic, reciprocal relationship that mitigates the strictures of traditional, imperialistic hegemony" (51). This is a fairly controversial statement. Williams represents qualitative research as caring and communicative, while stating that empiricism, or "traditional" research, is domineering, power driven, and unconcerned with the research subjects. So while she does not explicitly make the argument that quantitative research is bad, her implication is clear. More troubling than the actual statement though, is ease with which Williams makes it. She offers no explanation as to how or why traditional research is "imperialistic" or hegemonic. Barton explains, "Williams makes her negative argument by implication here: she does not identify 'tradition' methodologies, nor does she make a case that such methodologies are imperialistic or hegemonic, in what ways, for what purposes, and with what results for the creation and dissemination of knowledge" (401). She seems to make this statement believing that her opinion of empiricism is one that is generally understood and accepted.

### **Fears for the Future of Quantitative Research**

Amidst these arguments, supporters of empirical methodologies have had to defend their position in composition research and reassert the efficacy of this paradigm. Where once the authority of empiricism in composition research had been beyond reproach, it now is heavily scrutinized. Most of course have just continued to point to

generalizability and scientism as reasons as rationale for the initial and continued reliance on empiricism in composition. Furthermore, they have stressed the need in composition and rhetoric for the kind of knowledge created through empiricism. However, their arguments seem to be ignored, as the rhetorical attacks against empiricism continue.

Many are concerned that the negative attitudes toward quantitative research will continue to marginalize empiricism and, ultimately, damage the field of composition and rhetoric. Subsequently, they have tried to communicate these fears to the larger composition community in hopes of reviving empiricism. Johaneck asks readers simply, "For those fields that reject scientism as a means of organizing themselves, to what do they turn," (23). She goes on then to discuss how in turning from empiricism, composition has embraced the personal anecdote (23), the implication being that in turning away from empiricism, composition has sacrificed legitimate research.

Peck MacDonald has a similar prediction, stating even more aggressively:

With an influx of theorizing from the humanities and an assortment of intellectual influences from postmodernism- calls for multi- vocal texts, 'the interpretive turn,' distrust of science, a reassertion of the value of the local- composition studies today has in some ways turned away from empirical research and knowledge making. (111).

Like Johaneck, Peck MacDonald warns the end of empiricism is really an end to composition research as a whole or as she says a rejection of "knowledge making."

Barton does not think that the end of empiricism will necessarily indicate the end of composition research. However, the cessation of quantitative research does concern

her, as it would have a severe impact on the landscape of composition research, limiting what kind of knowledge can be created. She explains:

When empirical methodologies are devalued by negative argumentation, however, there are at least three troubling implications that follow. First, this devaluation risks losing sight of the ethics of empirical frameworks, thereby exacerbating the continually simmering conflict with regard to the nature, place, and value of empirical studies in composition. Second, in devaluing empirical studies, the field may lose its ability to ask certain kinds of questions about oral and written language and the complexities of its production and interpretation in various contexts. Third, as a result of devaluing empirical research, the field may lose its ability to make appropriate methodological choices for investigating problems of value, thereby impoverishing the methodological education we offer to new practitioners in the field. (403)

To some extent, these, their fears have not been realized. There is still quantitative research in composition, despite the argumentation against it. That is not to say however, that the negative rhetoric against empiricism has been ineffective. To the contrary, quantitative research has become so disassociated with composition that in 1999, Mary Sue MacNealy, a professor specializing in teaching research strategies, published a book *Strategies for Empirical Research in Writing*, in which she asserted that despite its humanist background, empirical research could be applied to composition research, if only it would be accepted by composition's 'traditionalists.' She writes, "Sadly, the idea that empirical research in writing has helped improve the teaching of composition and

technical writing is often rejected by traditionalists" (2). While to some extent, her claim here is true, the striking part of this statement is that MacNealy clearly believes qualitative research to be traditional research in composition. She came to believe this after talking with compositionists who attacked quantitative research methods and noticing a lack of empirical research presented in journals and at conferences (2-3). The negative argumentation is to a large degree responsible for this diminished presence of empirical research in composition.

### **Conclusion**

In the early 80's when qualitative research was trying to create a space for itself in composition research, empiricists were a bit unwelcoming. As was discussed at length in the previous chapter, they saw qualitative research as supplemental at best and incapable of being a strong methodological alternative to quantitative research. However, the arguments now leveled against empirical research are even more rigid than those originally put forth against qualitative methodologies. Quantitative researchers at least saw qualitative research as useful, if only in a service capacity. They viewed the work beneficial to composition research, opening the door to "methodological pluralism." The assertions by Voss, Holzberg, Connors, Bishop, and Williams are much more damaging in nature, conveying the idea that although quantitative research is okay, it is not particularly useful to composition researchers. Although only Voss explicitly stated this, the others imply it.

This rhetoric has certainly marginalized quantitative research. Yet in almost all of the essays employing this negative methodological argumentation, there is a statement that also praises quantitative research. Holzberg and Connor's articles even encourage its

further use in composition and rhetoric. Despite this trope though, it is clear that these qualitative researchers do not really accept empiricism or see it as a vital part of composition research. It would be easy to think of each as representative of just one thing or just one thing. In the next chapter, I will look at qualitative research methodologies and how we use them to create knowledge in the field of composition and rhetoric. More specifically, I will discuss how the word "qualitative" is applied to a range of studies that vary in technique, construction, depth, length, and purpose. Within this broader group though, distinctions must be made. Although the methods are the same or similar in all kinds of qualitative research, they are used in different ways and therefore create different kinds of knowledge. Making these distinctions is an important part of reaching the methodological reconciliation needed to fully understand, utilize, and appreciate the various research

A researcher conducting a qualitative study could be "in the field" researching for a few weeks or a few years. She may be trying to contribute to the overall knowledge of her field or she may be trying to gain insight into her own classroom. She may use questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, observations, textual analysis, conversation analysis, participant observation, etc. She may use these methods alone or in some combination. All of this, the various research methods and contexts, can be defined as qualitative. However, these methods can be and are used for different research purposes and in very different ways. Consequently, they produce different kinds of research.

To truly understand and value these different types of research, distinctions need to be drawn not only between qualitative research and quantitative research, but also within each research paradigm. In this chapter, I will discuss how the various types of qualitative research, in combination with their own generally associated with one another

### Chapter 3: Distinctions in Qualitative Research

To look at the methodological dichotomy of qualitative research versus quantitative research, it would be easy to think of each as representative of just one thing or just one kind of research. But, really, the terms qualitative and quantitative only convey a very general idea to the audience. They let readers know the broad principles that guide a particular research study. They might give insights into the kind of research question that was asked. They may even imply what kind of knowledge might be produced. But they give no indication of specific methodologies used, length and depth of work, or analytical framework. Qualitative research methodologies, in particular, create many different kinds of research projects because of the range of methods termed “qualitative” and also their versatility and usefulness in different research environments. A researcher conducting a qualitative study could be “in the field” researching for a few weeks or a few years. She may be trying to contribute to the overall knowledge of her field or she may be trying to gain insight into her own classroom. She may use questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, observation, textual analysis, conversation analysis, participant observation, etc. She may use these methods alone or in some combination. All of this, the various research methods and models, can be defined as qualitative. However, these methods can be and are used for different research purposes and in very different ways. Consequently, they produce different kinds of research.

To really understand and value these different types of research, distinctions need to be drawn not only between qualitative research and quantitative research, but also within each research paradigm. In this chapter, I will discuss how the various types of qualitative research in composition have been too generally associated with one another

and how that has led to problems in understanding and accepting different kinds of work. In particular, I will be looking at how ethnographic methodologies are used in composition to create the classroom ethnographies, teacher-research projects, and classroom “anecdotes.” I will show how these types of research have been mistakenly grouped together, both by qualitative researchers and quantitative researchers. I will then explore the principles, attributes, and limitations of each, showing then how they are important to composition research in different ways. More significantly though, I demonstrate how research is at times misunderstood and even discounted as a result of these terms being used inappropriately.

### **The Ethnography**

Qualitative researcher Harry Wolcott once said, “There is something of a perceptive ethnographer in each of us... each of us must succeed as an intuitive participant and observer for sheer survival in a social milieu,” (45). In other words, people constantly observe each other. They watch. They make mental notes about the things that around them. But are they all then also engaging in ethnographic research? The brief answer to that is yes and no. As was discussed in Chapter 1, ethnography is based on observations and interaction with and within a given community. So in that sense, in the sense I think Wolcott intended, we are all innately ethnographers. However, ethnographic research is much more intense and much more rigorous than merely “people watching.” Ethnography is rooted in careful examination and analysis of a research environment. Researchers must look meticulously at a research community from many points of view, studying the people involved in it, the cultural norms, beliefs, and

practices, and also the outside perceptions that may have an impact on the community.

Laurer and Asher explain:

Using a variety of methods, they [ethnographers] collect a rich array of data, taking field notes, interviewing, collecting writing samples and whatever other information is available. They analyze and code the data, identifying, defining, and relating what seem to be important variables, and finally report their study in the form of thick descriptions. (48)

In other words, ethnographic research is an incredibly involved process. In larger studies, researchers can spend years, completely absorbed in their focal community. Patton discusses this point writing, "The primary method of ethnographers is participant observation in the tradition of anthropology. This means intensive fieldwork in which the investigator is immersed in the culture under study" (81). The work in a very real way becomes their lives. Researchers interact and build relationships with their subjects. They often become participants in, and, sometimes, even advocates of (i.e. Denny Taylor *Toxic Literacies*), their research community rather than just silent observers.

This kind of involvement is a vital part of ethnographic research. Researchers must be able to rhetorically recreate the research community for their audiences. They must be able to offer details and description as a way of justifying and explaining their findings. Goetz and LeCompte explain, "An ethnographic product is evaluated by the extent to which it recapitulates the cultural scene studied so that readers envision the same scene as was witnessed by the researcher (Beals, Spindler, and Spindler 1973; Wolcott 1975)" (2). It is from this "thick description" and the researcher's ability to observe and articulate the subtleties and underlying themes of her research community,

that ethnographic research draws its authority and efficacy. In short, researchers must really know their subjects and research community, and more to the point, they need to be able to demonstrate that familiarity to their audience.

As was discussed in chapter 1, ethnography is an extremely useful tool in education research, and, more specifically, for studying the composition classroom, as it facilitates a deeper examination of students, teachers, and the classroom situation in general. Gordon et al argue this point in more detail, stating:

Intersecting analyses focusing on lives of children, young people and adults in educational settings still need to be developed beyond foci of single perspectives. This is a great challenge for educational research, and one that the ethnographic approach in particular, with its focus on complex and multi-layered practices and the meanings attached to such process and practices and the meanings, is in a strong position to meet. (199)

Ethnography, then, enables researchers to look more closely at the many parts of a classroom situation and how they interact and shape the course. They can look at a course from different angles so that they can really get a more holistic sense of what is going on or what is taking place in that environment. Ethnography gives composition researchers, an opportunity to critically examine the social and educational construction and implementation of the writing classroom, to look at the students and their individual writing processes, and to explore students' attitude about writing. In short, researchers doing ethnographic studies seek to describe the work being done in the composition classroom and student performance. But they also value what they can learn from

examining the many relationships, attitudes, personalities, and behaviors that also undeniably have an impact on the writing classroom.

The benefits of doing this kind of work in composition are obvious. But in the same way that ethnography's focus on "multi-layered practices" and depth lends itself to rich, meaningful, description, it also makes ethnography difficult to complete. A lot of time is spent both in the research community gathering data and in the process of analyzing the data. As a result, ethnographers will inevitably collect a substantial amount of data. While on one hand, one can't help but think that the collection of more data is indicative of more thorough work; critics of ethnography and even experienced researchers see this as a potential problem. They point to the fact that ethnographic research can actually lead to a "data overload" that is simply impossible to fully analyze. Laurer and Asher, in their discussion of Sadler's critique of ethnography, write, "...it is well known that people have severe limitations on the amount of data they can receive, remember, and process, especially when inferences are to be made. Data may be so extensive as to inhibit adequate analysis" (46). The lengthy and thorough analysis needed to avoid this problem, can present a real challenge for ethnographers as they may be limited by time or even fiscal constraints.

Even if the data is thoroughly analyzed, there is still a lot of information to relay to the audience. Ethnographies are often very long and very detailed and it is difficult to feature them in academic journals. In other words, to reach an audience, ethnographic work in its entirety would almost need to be published in a book. Kantor et al explain, "Inherent in the use of such prolific data collection strategies is the problem of reducing findings to journal length articles. How can this be done without sacrificing flavor, thick

description, or a sense of the full context,” (“Research in Context” 304). With its authority rooted in full and detailed descriptions of research environments, ethnography cannot really be partially presented. The readers need to see what went on in a research community, what it looked like and how the subjects acted and interacted, if they are to understand or trust the research findings. In other words, without a full disclosure, readers may not be able to fully understand how certain conclusions were reached, thereby creating doubt as to their validity.

### **Teacher- Research**

In writing research, ethnography, in the strictest sense of the word, usually entails a researcher going into a new classroom or writing situation. However, many composition instructors use ethnographic research methods to further explore questions and concerns that may have been raised in their own classes. This work, teacher-research, is grounded in the idea that teachers can effectively and meaningfully examine their own students and classrooms to explore various facets of teaching and learning. In her discussion of teacher-research, Ruth Ray, a compositionist and teacher-researcher, discusses these differences stating:

While most formal researchers are committed to the idea of change occurring from the top down, from the global to the local level by way of theory- teacher researchers are committed to the idea that significant, lasting educational research occurs from the bottom up- from the individual classrooms to the larger community by way of practitioner inquiry. (49)

Teacher- researchers are interested in looking more critically at themselves as teachers, their students, and the construction of the course as a way of researching the larger, more “global” writing classroom.

As teacher- researchers try to gain this deeper understanding of their own classrooms and students, they deploy many of the same qualitative methodologies that are used in ethnographies. In fact, in terms of the methodologies used to research, there is no significant difference between ethnography and teacher- research. MacNealy discusses this parallel in her book, *Empirical Research in Writing*. She writes:

To study the students, teachers may make field notes as they observe students working in groups, they may ask the students to keep logs to track their own and their classmates’ activities, they may ask the students to keep journals in which they reflect on these activities, and teachers may make tape recordings of interviews, conferences, class activities, and group work, and so on. Sometimes teachers also administer questionnaires to their students in order to learn attitudes at the beginning and/ or end of the semester or year, information on past experiences, and information on beliefs or things learned in prior classes or writing situations. (245)

To look at this description of teacher- research, one can very easily see that the methods used in that situation are the same as those used in ethnography. Teacher- researchers, like ethnographers, depend on qualitative methods (i.e. questionnaires, interviews, textual analysis, observation, and interaction) to thoroughly examine their research environments. They then share their work by giving a rhetorical explanation and

description of their research community to their audience to discuss and validate their findings.

Because of the methodological similarities it is easy to mistake the two types of work or see them as the same thing. Bishop has even written explicitly that aside from a few technicalities, they are the same thing. In *Ethnographic Writing Research: Writing It Up, Writing It Down, and Reading It*, she discusses the two types of research and, in parentheses, explains the difference between them, writing, “ethnographic researchers study other teachers’ classes, while, teacher-researchers study their own classes” (13). Although she later goes on to contradict herself as she further discusses the two types of work, here she seems to gloss over that distinction, allowing readers to think that the role of the researcher is an unimportant or insignificant difference.

This is not the case. The fact that the researcher is a part of her research changes the face of the work entirely. As Bishop herself later explains, “Because Kim [a central researcher in Bishop’s book] is the teacher of the classroom she observes, she cannot claim to study the culture from the culture’s point of view, because she has the authority to convene and shape that culture” (36). Because Kim can shape her research environment, she is not assuming the traditional role of an ethnographer. Her participation prevents her from being merely a researcher.

Because of this integral involvement in the research community, a teacher-researcher must really examine her role in the class alongside her examination of the students and their work and attitudes. MacNealy explains:

To study teachers, researchers usually collect three types of data. First, they collect paper evidence such as syllabi, handouts (assignments and

informational), lesson plans, and lecture notes. Second, the teachers (and researchers) keep logs in which they record their activities and notes on conversations they hold with others regarding their activities. Third, both teachers and researchers record and share their reflections on these activities. (243-244)

Although, MacNealy is discussing the idea of using an outside researcher to look at the teacher, these same areas need to be examined when the teacher is the researcher. She must look at what she does and what she says and then reflect on how her actions affect the classroom and the students. She needs to think critically about how her role shaped her research environment, engaging in what MacNealy calls "self examination" (244).

The depth in which a teacher- researcher must examine herself and her role in the research community differs significantly from an ethnographer's discussion of her role as a participant observer, which is not as self- reflective. Instead, ethnographers discuss their role in terms of how their presence affects the community or how the researcher responds to the community. More specifically, that discussion centers on how an ethnographer has positioned herself in a given environment. Elizabeth Chisari- Strater explains:

For ethnographers, writing about how we are positioned is part of data.

We are trained to keep field notes on how we negotiate entrance into a community, how we present ourselves to our informants, how we think our informants perceive us- in addition to writing about what we think is linguistically and socially significant to the culture under investigation.

("Turning" 116)

The researcher's experience or role is only important in so far as it relates to the research community or affects the collection or analysis of data. In teacher- research, the role of the teacher is a much more integral part of the data. The teacher is a defining part of the research community. Her function and position in the research community is much deeper and much more influential than that of a mere researcher. Subsequently, understanding that influence and role are necessary to understanding the research community as a whole.

This involvement further separates teacher- research from ethnography, as well as from other research paradigms, in the sense that the teacher is drawing her authority from a place of familiarity with her students and her class as opposed to a place of distance. Ethnographers generally go into other new environments, and, although involved in their new community, they still strive to maintain an outsider's perspective on the research community. Chiseri- Strater discusses this distinction in her book *Academic Literacies*.

She writes:

According to Wilcox, the overall aim of the ethnographer is to 'combine the view of the insider with that of an outsider to describe a social setting.

In each of the several academic settings in which I worked, I was able to achieve both an insider and an outsider's perspective. (187)

Chiseri- Strater believed that it was important for her to see her research community from different angles, different lenses, if her ethnography was going to produce any new information about student writers. She needed to understand what was going on inside the community, but she also needed to retain a certain distance to be really effective in her role as ethnographer.

To some, this unfamiliarity with the environment and the subjects is valued as it is seen as helping researchers to have a heightened awareness of the culture, as everything is new and, therefore, more observable. In short, it helps researchers to be more “objective.” Conversely, in one’s own classroom, a teacher- researcher may not recognize certain nuances or behaviors because they are the norm. In a discussion of this argument Ray writes, “Teachers as participant observers, may lack the perspective necessary to see and interpret their own classroom” (Teacher- Research 183). In other words, because teacher- researchers are not outside researchers or observers, because they are an inseparable and central part of that community critics question their, critics question whether or not they can be as perceptive and thorough in their own classroom, as an outside researcher might be.

Teacher- researchers are also criticized for their lack of training in research. This argument is grounded in the idea that there are people who create knowledge and people who employ it. North explains this distinction, writing, “Practitioners are regarded essentially as technicians: Scholars and especially researchers *make* knowledge; Practitioners apply it” (21). The implication of this statement, at its best, asserts that the two positions are separate, that there is a dichotomy, or a parallelism, between teacher and researcher. Taken at it worst, it is an assertion that teachers are not capable of doing the work of researchers. In a sense, they are supposed to do what they are told by the researchers and scholars who know better. Kantor explains how early in his own career he held this idea, albeit subconsciously, and how it permeated through his work. He writes:

As I reread my piece I could see that I had unintentionally implied that researchers possessed a higher theoretical knowledge which it was their job to pass on to the more practical-minded teachers. And the language in which I had presented my summaries was indeed marked by jargon and removed from the discourse with which we might normally communicate.

(Learning 62)

Kantor, even without meaning to do so, had at one time contributed to the belief that researchers were both completely separate from and also superior to the “practical-minded” teachers.

This obviously condescending insinuation is made more troubling because it seems to marginalize the knowledge that teachers have about their own classes. North contends, “Without question, the academic reflex to hold lore in low regard represents a serious problem in Composition, and Practitioners need to defend themselves- to argue for the value of what they know, and how they come to know it” (55). By implying that teachers cannot or ought not be researchers, one is essentially saying that teachers cannot be trusted to read their classrooms and understand how their experience fits into the larger discipline of composition.

Ray and others see teacher-research as being in direct opposition to this ideal. She writes, “Teacher-research is, in short, an emancipation proclamation that results in new ownership- teachers *own* research into their *own* problems that results in modification of their own behaviors and theories” (Teacher- Research 174). She sees this type of work as empowering teachers to assert their knowledge on a larger scale and share it with other to help create knowledge about the teaching and learning of writing.

More radically, Anne Berthoff, another advocate of teacher- research, wants teacher- research to replace other types of research entirely. She believes that people who are in the classroom create the only educational research that is valuable. She argues:

Educational research is nothing to our purpose, unless we formulate the questions; if the procedures by which answers are sought are not dialectic and dialogic, that is to say if questions and answers are not continually REformulated by those who are working in the classroom, educational research is pointless. My spies tell me that its becoming harder and harder for researchers to get into schools: I rejoice in that news because I think it might encourage teachers to become researchers themselves, and once that happens, the character of the research is bound to change. (31)

Her view is obviously more extreme, but like Ray and other advocates of teacher- research, Berthoff wants to see teachers assert their knowledge of and authority in the classroom. More directly, Berthoff, Ray, and others want to see a disciplinary recognition of “practitioner” knowledge and authority.

Teacher- research sets out not only to tell the story about a classroom experience, but also to examine that classroom and try to use that data to enhance the overall knowledge and understanding composition as a whole. It is unique in that it is written from the point of view of a person who is inherently entrenched in her research environment, someone who intimately knows her research subjects and community. Although some may frown upon this closeness, it cannot be denied that teacher- research offers an insider’s look at a classroom that simply cannot be captured by an outside

observer or researcher. To deny its worth as an independent research paradigm is to deprive the composition community of that interesting and important point of view.

### **The Teaching Anecdote**

More often than not, teacher- research is discounted or devalued as it is seen as yielding stories or narratives, not research. Johaneck, at the beginning of her text, looks at the 1998 NCTE call for papers, which she claims values “teacher- research” (8). On the following page, she again refers to the call for papers, writing:

Reflection and anecdotes are important to our understanding of what we do, but the NCTE announcement suggested what was not invited:

quantitative studies, experimental research, or anything else that doesn't seem to fit a conference theme that highlights participant observation and the personal anecdote. (9)

In this passage, she easily replaces the term teacher- research with anecdote. This is problematic as teacher- research is very different from the anecdote.

A teaching anecdote is just that: a story about teaching. Its purpose is not necessarily to contribute to the making of knowledge in composition or to create theory. It is more of a dialogue among teachers about their experiences in the classroom. The anecdote stands in sharp contrast to teacher- research, which seeks to generate a “global” knowledge and contribute to the larger awareness of the writing class. Teacher- research, like ethnography, is detailed and rigorous in its data collection and analysis. Ray actually feels that this work should be defined by these qualities. She asserts:

A good working definition of teacher research is, ‘systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers,’ where systematic implies

methodical data gathering, analyzing, and reporting; intentional means planned rather than spontaneous activity; and inquiry implies a questioning, reflective stance toward teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 3). (Teacher- Research 173).

This type of teacher- research, the type of research promoted by Ray and most others, still relies on defined research methods and careful analysis to yield trustworthy results. The teaching anecdote does not necessarily strive to meet these goals. Rather, the teaching anecdote is a tool used by teachers and even students to share their ideas and stories with a larger academic community.

Despite these differences, the anecdote and teacher- research both focus centrally on classroom experience. Perhaps it is because of this perceived commonality that the distinctions between the two terms and their respective practices become sometimes blurred. In his definition of “lore” North blurs this line, grouping together both teacher- research, or what he calls “practice as inquiry” and anecdotal teaching stories. He defines lore as “the accumulated body of traditions, practices, and beliefs in terms of how writing is done, learned, and taught” (22). He then goes on to say:

It is driven, first, by a pragmatic logic: It is concerned with what has worked, is working, or might work in teaching, doing or learning writing. Second, its structure is essentially experiential. That is, the traditions, practices, and beliefs of which it is constituted are best understood as being organized within an experience- based framework. (23)

In this definition, North is discussing any work that is rooted in classroom experience as though it were the same thing. This assertion is overly simplistic and fallacious. Although

both teacher- research and the anecdote depend and center on incidents in the classroom, they do so in different ways. Where the teaching anecdote only discusses the story itself, teacher- researchers use the stories in relation to research. Patricia Lambert Stock, a compositionist and teacher- researcher, explores these differences:

We interpret them [anecdotes] and reinterpret them in light of the larger narratives that shape our professional practice. Situating specific teaching-learning moments in the material circumstances in which they occur and reflecting on them in their own terms rather than in another, specialized discourse, we replay them inviting colleagues who have not experienced those moments with us to examine them with us as we re- search them.

(185)

The anecdote in teacher- research serves as rationale or support for the findings; it is not the focal point as it is in the teaching anecdote.

It is fairly easy to see how the misapplication of these terms can lead to the diminished value of teacher- research. Instead of being viewed as a viable and credible method of composition research it is misunderstood and discussed as mere stories or narratives. Less obvious are the unfavorable implications for the teaching anecdote. When discussed as or mistaken for teacher research, the anecdote is held in comparison to other types of research, with regards to both its contribution to the overall knowledge of the field and, more importantly, with regard to its meeting of accepted research standards. These are standards that the teaching anecdote does not meet and as a result, it is often denigrated as being bad research. North explains, “judged against non- lore standards, Practitioners are bound to seem consistently indiscriminating, illogical, and

sloppy” (27). North is absolutely correct in this statement. How does a narrative about a particular lesson or an encounter with a student compare to a structured piece of research that has been methodically planned out and examined? The short answer is, it doesn't. There is no comparison between the two. There cannot be a real comparison between the two as they are different and serve different functions.

In her article, “The Scholarship of Teaching: Beyond the Anecdotal,” Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori proves this point in her examination of an excerpt from a book by George P. Elliott, that tells of his experience teaching the Book of Job. Of it she writes:

Elegant style. Deceptively self-deprecating. Captivating. Entertaining. Interesting. But what about the scene of instruction it represents? The student, the people to whom the teacher was presumably talking, are nowhere to be seen or heard. And theirs is not the only noticeable absence: an articulation of teaching of teaching as a transaction of knowledge between teacher, student, and text, the cultures that shape them, is absent from this way of talking about teaching. (299)

Salvatori is looking for depth that is simply not there. More to the point, it was not meant to be there. As Salvatori points out herself, this excerpt was meant to be a recollection of “the finest classroom experience’ he ever had” (Salvatori 298). Elliott wanted to discuss this teaching experience and reflect on why it was so personally rewarding. His did not intend to create knowledge or research; he simply wanted to share this one moment with others.

To be fair, Salvatori realizes his intentions and is actually more critical because of them. She writes:

This kind of talk, the style of the excerpt- impromptu, inspirational, imaginative- is often set in opposition to what has come to be defined as the opaque, depersonalizing, fetishistic, *discourse* of teaching, whose claims to scholarship are constructed as careerist, antithetical, to an unselfish love of teaching, betraying the “vocation” of teaching. (299)

Her objection then to this work is not that it is necessarily bad, but that it competes with other research in teaching. In other words, she fears that the stylistic allure of the anecdote often overshadows the content found in the “scholarship of teaching.”

Johanek shares this fear. In her discussion of teacher- research or the anecdote (which in her text are synonymous), it is clear that she is troubled by what she sees as replacement for legitimate research. She writes, “Such reliance on the personal anecdote has contributed more to ‘lore’ than to ‘research’ (9-10).

One would hope that these accusations would be groundless, that in differentiating research from anecdotes, scholars and other members of the composition community would not make a comparison or see the two as being in competition. But it seems that in an effort to recognize the voices of teachers and students, some have done just that. Bishop, in her zealous advocacy of teacher- talk or lore, seems to assert that the anecdote is perhaps more valuable than research. In briefly discussing several pieces of research, (theoretical, anecdotal, and empirical), she conveys to the reader that she is simply not as interested in the research writing. Upon realizing that a text was theory driven or empirically- based she moved on to another. Of one, she writes:

At this switch [from story to theory] – I start to feel that the opening story was a come- on, an advertisement, a gambit, intended to draw me in but

leaving me unsatisfied at the way the essay neglects to deliver on its teacher-talk promises. I start to skim, to fly like a hovercraft over story-turned-professional text and I never find myself dipping into the stream again- because no further classroom tales reach up to reengage me.

Unfortunately, it's back to the bookshelf. (Teacher-Talk 223)

Bishop seems to exemplify Salvatori's worst fear. She is choosing to look at a story as opposed to more rigorous work simply because the anecdote is more compelling to her. Worse, she is only responding to the creativity of the writing with no regard for purpose. A story is supposed to be engaging. The purpose of theory and research is not primarily to entertain the reader, it is foremost meant to be informative. One reads each for different reasons, so for Bishop to compare them in this manner is unreasonable.

Bishop's comparison here is fairly surprising, as she herself defines the anecdote as being a narrative or a story of about experiences in the classroom. In that definition, she seems careful to not assert its research value, focusing instead on the inviting and interesting story-telling features of the anecdote. She writes:

For my purposes here, when considering teacher-talk, I am looking at author-present prose which celebrates the first person voice, incorporates many story-telling/narrative strategies, and invites readers into the story-often by including classroom narratives and student voices. (229)

There is no mention here of the observation or discourse analysis found in qualitative research or the scientism advocated by quantitative research. In fact, there is no talk of research methods at all. Nor is there discussion of data or analysis. The only concern here

is that teacher- talk tells a story about teaching. This is not research. To present it as such is a mistake. As North explains:

Partly because of the medium and partly because of pressure from institutions and other communities, when Practitioners report on their inquiry in writing, they tend to misrepresent both its nature and authority, moving farther and farther from their pragmatic and experiential power base. And the harder they try, it seems to me, the worse things get. They look more and more like bad scholars or inadequate Researchers, and further undermine the public perception of Practitioner authority. (54-55)

When the anecdote is discussed as research or even likened or compared to research, it is held to the same standards as research. These are standards that as a mere story, the anecdote cannot hope to meet. A story, no matter how interesting or entertaining, cannot be viewed as a replacement or substitute for legitimate research. Moreover, I don't think that anyone would honestly contest this point, but it needs, perhaps, to be made more explicit as the anecdote becomes more of a permanent fixture in journals and at conferences.

Despite not being research, the anecdote should not be discounted or dismissed. It is still a valuable asset to composition studies, as a living discourse about the teaching of writing. It gives teachers and students an opportunity to reflect on moments in their teaching or learning that had an impact and it gives them a voice and a forum to communicate these experiences with others. It creates a community among writing instructors where ideas and insights can be shared, instruction can be enhanced, and new research questions can be raised.

## Implications

These three types of qualitative work, ethnography, teacher-research, and the teaching anecdote are often grouped together because, to some degree, each examines personal experience with the central community of the inquiry. Subsequently, they are placed in a category called “experiential” research. At best, this term is too broad, linking very different types of work together because of one shared element. At worst, this kind of overgeneralization is confusing and problematic, as demonstrated above. By using these terms flippantly and interchangeably, the efficacy of certain types of qualitative research is diminished or even trivialized.

As a community, composition must look at these kinds of research individually and hold each to a set of standards appropriate to its own focus and goals. In making these distinctions, composition researchers can begin to more fully appreciate and understand the various types of knowledge being created in the field.

**Conclusion: Where to Go From Here**

It is clear that in the discourse surrounding composition research, there is a rhetorical trope deployed by researchers to at once appease the members of a methodologically diverse discipline and mitigate their role in a decades-long paradigmatic debate. This trope asserts that there is equality among the methods; none is better than the other. Most importantly, it advocates the use of multiple research methodologies in the hopes of creating a broad base of knowledge about the teaching of writing. Unfortunately, this is often only a trope. It is an expression or turn of phrase that actually has very little tangible meaning behind it, as it often precedes a textual attack and devaluation of research that deviates from the author's own personal methodological preferences and ideologies. So in reality, the primary function of this trope is not necessarily to promote "methodological pluralism," but to hide a researcher's deep-seated methodological prejudices.

On one hand, one might argue, so what? Why does it matter if a researcher engages in this kind of rhetoric? Furthermore, why does it matter that researchers still harbor methodological prejudices? These are valid questions. After all, in composition research, both kinds of research are represented. It seems that the methodological debate has subsided into a semi-peaceable "live and let live" compromise, with one group of researchers using and valuing one kind of research, while the other group uses and values a different kind of research. But is this really methodological pluralism? I don't think so. "Methodological pluralism" is not only different researchers using different research methods. It is a real recognition of those methods. It means that composition researchers

appreciate the knowledge that can be gained from all research methods, even the ones with which they do not personally engage.

This trope makes this kind of pluralism difficult to achieve as it limits the open exchange of ideas. It enables researchers to avoid real methodological discussions and pretend that certain preconceptions and biases about research methods don't exist. It hides the fact that many researchers are still very wary of research that differs from their own and, subsequently, they don't really recognize its value and take it as seriously.

Ideally, now that I have identified this trope and its limiting effects, I would offer some brilliant solution to the problem. Unfortunately I cannot do that. The truth is that this trope is only symptomatic of the much bigger issue in composition research: the methodological division among researchers. Simply put, there are researchers who advocate the primary use of qualitative methods and others who advocate the primary use of empiricist methods. There is no solution that I could propose that would change these beliefs.

I can suggest, however, that we stop using this kind of evasive rhetoric. When we talk about our research and our choice of research methods, we do not have to eviscerate other methods. It is sufficient to explain research questions and explore how the chosen method of research fit that particular inquiry. As a discipline, we already use both qualitative and quantitative research methods. We have been doing so for more than twenty years. It seems futile then to argue for the use or validity of a particular research method as both have been firmly established. It is time for composition researchers to move beyond that type of discussion. They need to stop discussing why a research

method is holistically valuable or more valuable and instead, show readers why it is valuable to their specific piece of work.

By discussing research in this way, by simply discussing research and methodological choices in context, we affirm the value and necessity of our chosen research method. We highlight what kind of knowledge can be gained through the utilization of that method. Furthermore, by not employing a “negative argumentation” against other methodologies, we lessen the possibility of alienating other researchers and other kinds of research. As I stated above, I am not naïve enough to believe that the termination of this trope will end methodological division. But I think that it is the first step toward realizing real “methodological pluralism” in composition research.

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