



WRITING STUDIES  
RESEARCH  
IN PRACTICE

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METHODS AND METHODOLOGIES

Edited by Lee Nickoson  
& Mary P. Sheridan

Foreword by Gesa E. Kirsch

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Mary P. Sheridan

WITH A FOREWORD BY GESA E. KIRSCH

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*To our academic and personal role models:*

*the researchers represented in this collection, who  
whether in person or through their scholarship have  
inspired and guided our work for many years*

*and our children, Mary P.'s daughter, Mary Pauline, and  
sons, Luke and Aidan, and Lee's daughter, Olivia. Our  
children's playfulness and curiosity remind us that the world  
is an interesting place and our lives are full of wonder.*



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Foreword: New Methodological Challenges  
for Writing Studies Researchers

*Gesa E. Kirsch*

Readers of this volume can expect to find exciting new work on research methods and methodologies. When Patricia Sullivan and I first published *Methods and Methodology in Composition Research*, the “social turn” was prominent in rhetoric and composition studies (see Journet, this volume, for more details). Since that time, a number of other “turns” have shaped research in the field. Among the most notable trends has been a focus on ethics and representation, on computers and composition, on visual literacy, on activist research, on globalization, and on archival research, to name a few. We now regularly study rhetorical activities in a much-wider range of contexts than twenty years ago: in after-school settings (e.g., Sheridan, this volume), in service-learning and community organizations (e.g., Goldblatt), in the many social networking sites unfolding on the web (Hawisher and Selfe; Haas, Takayoshi, and Carr; Palmquist, Mullin, and Blalock, this volume), in historical contexts (e.g., Rohan; Lamos, this volume), and among groups often considered to reside at the margins of society (e.g., Inoue, this volume; Canagarajah, this volume; Daniell; Mathieu; Royster; Sohn). Much of this new research is taking place within a U.S. context, but composition scholars are also beginning to cross borders and study rhetorical activities in international and transnational contexts (e.g., Lunsford, this volume; Daniell and Mortensen; Hesford and Schell). Clearly, these expanding contexts for writing studies challenge researchers to adapt and refine research methods and to develop new ones.

One particular challenge researchers now face is adapting different research methods to diverse settings and reporting this research in genres that best reflect these methods. Many scholars do this by creating hybrid genres. Take, for example, Charlotte Hogg’s fascinating study *From the*

*Garden Club: Rural Women Writing Community*. In her research, Hogg uses a variety of research methods to study rural women's literacy, including historical research, interviews, participant-observation, oral history, reflection, memoir, and autoethnography. Since Hogg has a personal connection to the rural women she studied (including her grandmother and other women she knew as a child) and to the town, Paxton, Nebraska (where she spent several years as a child), she includes family history, childhood memories, and description of town events in her research narrative.

Works like these raise many questions: How do we read and interpret the author's "passionate attachment" to her subject (a term coined by Jacqueline Jones Royster in *Traces of a Stream*)? How do we gain a critical distance if the author is so central to the research narrative? Or is a critical distance not desirable? Where does research end and memoir begin? How do we assess this kind of hybrid genre? As research? As memoir? As a historical narrative? What are the qualities for excellence in any one of these genres? Clearly, there is value to reflecting on cultural memory, to researching a subject with a personal connection, and to using local history as a starting point. Yet, this new kind of work also poses challenges for readers and writers alike: how to be respectful yet also critical, descriptive yet not excessively so, analytical while narrating a town history. These challenges are not easy to meet, but they offer exciting opportunities for new kinds of insights, writing, and knowledge. As Royster and I note elsewhere, it is precisely "in this balancing act that we find the promise and potential in much of the new work in our field" (662).

In her chapter in this volume, Liz Rohan argues for the value of this kind of research—research that attends to the local, evolves over time, and proceeds as a "lived process." Rohan argues that researchers who attend to place, imagination, and intuition in their archival work often create deeper connections with their subjects, which, in turn, can yield richer findings. Importantly, this new understanding of archival work leads to methodological changes that Rohan begins to sketch out in her chapter. Furthermore, in *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*, Rohan and I document the power of this approach to research: how exploring a personal connection, a chance discovery, or an intriguing fact can inspire researchers, foster a commitment to the work, and bring passion into the research process.

A second methodological challenge researchers face frequently these days arises from the effort to foster interactive, collaborative, reciprocal, mutually beneficial, nonhierarchical relations with research participants and their communities. Researchers now regularly invite participants

to become coresearchers, copresenters, and coauthors of their work. At times, researchers turn over control almost completely to research participants. For instance, Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher, in their collaborative work with transnational graduate students, asked participants to document, video record, and reflect on their own literate practices as they communicate across different cultures, languages, and continents in settings of their choosing (e.g., home, office, library). Many of these students had moved from one region of the world to another for political, economic, or educational reasons and used different media to communicate with different audiences—e-mail, texting, phone calls, and traditional letters. In this particular study, Selfe and Hawisher asked participants to create self-representations of their literate lives: Participants could record literate activities they deemed important, at times that suited them, in locations they felt comfortable doing so. Participants were also invited to include commentary, reflection, and soundtracks in their video recordings. Researcher-participants collaboratively analyzed, interpreted, presented, and published their work in different venues, such as at conferences, in journals, online, and in video recordings. This study is an interesting, rich example of the new dimensions of collaborative work, challenging us to rethink traditional roles/boundaries between researchers and participants, the shape of research material (what's included, highlighted, and omitted, and who does the selecting), and the uses of different media to represent this work.

In the current volume, Christina Haas, Pamela Takayoshi, and Brandon Carr study one example of how the many interactive, searchable, and social networking sites now available on the web have radically transformed language use among the current generation of students—how they communicate, network, and share information. Specifically, they focus on the features and uses of instant messaging among undergraduate students and call for the development of methodologies that reflect these new forms of communication. They illustrate the importance of getting access to “insider” information, in this case, working collaboratively with research participants who may use technologies in ways that researchers might not know or imagine. Haas, Takayoshi, and Carr point to the rich literacy lives that students experience online—often outside the classroom and outside the domain of supervision—and suggests that these literate lives beg a host of new research questions.

A third methodological challenge arises directly from the increasingly collaborative nature of research: As writing studies has expanded its scope and breadth to include the rhetorical activities of those whose

voices have been neglected, silenced, or rarely heard, scholars are showing a renewed concern for representing participants with respect, care, and complexity. This challenge is equally important whether we write about contemporary or historical figures. In our collaborative work, Royster and I explore how to represent historical figures fairly, thoughtfully, and honestly. We ask, “When we study women of the past, especially those whose voices have rarely been heard or studied by rhetoricians, how do we render their work and lives meaningfully? How do we honor their traditions? How do we transport ourselves back to the time and context in which they lived, knowing full well that is not possible to see things from their vantage point?” (648). These questions are particularly challenging when researchers study historical figures whose values or worldviews they may not share. How do we represent these groups fairly, respectfully, and accurately? Researchers are more likely now to recognize the vulnerability of historical figures and their own responsibility to create comprehensive, multidimensional, and complex portraits of those who came before us. Questions of ethics and representation are of critical importance here.

The same kinds of ethical challenges are also faced by researchers investigating institutional histories: When they uncover the histories of programs, administrators, or policies that appear conservative, perhaps even bigoted, sexist, or racist from our perspective, how do they represent them fairly, thoughtfully, and critically at the same time? Steve Lamos offers some answers to these questions in his fascinating chapter “Institutional Critique in Composition Studies” (this volume). Lamos discusses the challenge of writing institutional histories with honesty, accuracy, and enough historical detail to capture the culture and politics of the time but without pointing a blaming finger at key administrators or policy makers who may have carried out the mission of their institutions even if they did not create or agree with those policies. Ethics and representation, then, play a key role when researchers study people, places, or programs whose beliefs, values, and worldviews they might find at odds with their own.

Similarly, and perhaps more obviously, living research participants and communities deserve careful, thoughtful, and ethical representations. In this volume, Heidi A. McKee and James E. Porter examine the vulnerabilities of web participants in social-networking groups. They argue that even though web users may post their writing on publicly accessible blogs or social-networking sites, researchers need to remain vigilant about participants’ privacy, vulnerability, and consent. McKee and Porter offer a thoughtful analysis of distinct web forums and provide a matrix for thinking systematically about ethical issues when studying

literacy, social networking, and rhetorical activities on the web—a rich, new territory of potential insights and quandaries.

The contributors to *Writing Studies Research in Practice* rise to the many new challenges contemporary writing researchers face. They chart important new directions for research and examine the enduring power of some research methods and the evolving nature of others. They also reflect on the field's dynamic changes and offer their visions for the future. What struck me in particular when reading the chapters in this book is that scholars in composition studies write with self-confidence and experience, reflecting on how research methods and methodologies have evolved over the last few decades. No longer do scholars apologize for using, adapting, or borrowing methods that originated in the social sciences; instead, these scholars offer critiques and insights on what methods have proven useful for what kinds of questions (Fishman), reflect on their own “proclivities” (Broad) and “research stance” (Grabill), explain how methods are changing to meet emerging questions (Selfe and Hawisher), articulate the historical and theoretical assumptions of different methodologies (Journet), and argue for approaches to research that can contribute to social change (Blair).

*Writing Studies Research in Practice* also offers welcome practical, hands-on advice from scholars working on a wide range of topics. Their pragmatic advice makes this book a valuable resource for scholars interested in research and methodology, in designing and conducting research, and in better understanding questions of ethics and representation. This inspiring collection shows that writing studies is now a mature and well-established discipline. Along with that growth and maturity comes the accompanying development of new journals, new web sites, new conferences, new resources, and new research methods—all of which shape much of the discussion in this volume. *Writing Studies Research in Practice* brings home that it is an exciting time to be in rhetoric and writing studies: The field invites, recognizes, and rewards innovative research and provides many forums for sharing, enhancing, and enriching our understanding of methods and methodologies.

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WRITING STUDIES RESEARCH IN PRACTICE



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## Introduction: Current Conversations on Writing Research

*Mary P. Sheridan and Lee Nickoson*

Regardless of the field or discipline, conversations about methods and about the motivations for and possible implications of those methods (methodologies) have often focused on foundational questions, such as what are people doing? How are they doing it? And why are they doing it this way? Even as these questions endure, the specifics change. This has been the case in writing studies, where radical changes in what we consider writing and research on writing over the last twenty years have prompted a need to adapt traditional types of research. Dramatic changes in digital writing and research, for example, challenge traditional monomodal assessments of what constitutes writing; a greater understanding of classrooms as nestled in complex networks calls for alternative approaches to these traditional sites of study; and the increasing recognition of extracurricular writing demands that we expand where we study.

Attending to the changing disciplinary landscape challenges scholars to pursue new ways of investigating what it means to study writing today. As we examine the practical, theoretical, and ethical issues facing contemporary writing researchers today, we need to ask: What questions about writing interest us now? What methods can help us address our field's questions? What do we gain, and lose, from adopting a particular methodology? Although *Writing Studies Research in Practice: Methods and Methodologies* explores these questions from a multitude of interdisciplinary perspectives, the conversations contained here maintain a shared understanding of research as situated, systematic, and reflective investigation of literate activity with the goal of deepening our understanding of why, how, when, where, and what writers write. The following twenty chapters represent variously positioned arguments on how and

why research about writing is currently being conducted. Contributing authors offer practical advice as well as reflect upon their experiences with particular methods and methodologies, a perspective that all too often is absent from a study's final publication. In this way, *Writing Studies Research in Practice* invites readers to contemplate the many pragmatics and problematics involved in studying writing from researchers directly and, in so doing, invites readers to become versed in multiple practices of our field so that we might continue to develop the practices needed to identify and study today's pressing research questions.

### Enduring Questions

Readers will find that many of the following chapters describe *what* the researchers do and *how* they do it—the methods or practices researchers engage in as they identify research topics, design strategies for collecting, managing, and interpreting the collected data, and determine how to represent their findings. These are important steps in any research project, and yet, such questions will make little sense without knowing the *whys* of research. Consequently, contributors also explain their methodologies, the epistemological and theoretical interests that drive researchers' understanding of their study and of themselves (their roles and responsibilities) within that study. Although readers may find the distinction between *methods* and *methodologies* to be hazy, such slippage exposes the complex ways researchers navigate this intertwining of practice and theory.

Readers will also find many current research approaches bound to past incarnations, though the contours of these approaches shift and blur in powerful ways. One place this blurring occurs is in what we consider literate activity. For example, Christina Haas, Pamela Takayoshi, and Brandon Carr illustrate that although emoticons play a central role in pervasive, everyday writing practices such as texting, these visuals also challenge our understanding of what counts as a content unit for analysis in our studies of writing. A second place this blurring occurs is in just how multilayered learning environments are. As Asao B. Inoue, Steve Lamos, and Karen J. Lunsford each argue, literacy is learned and practiced in complicated, seemingly invisible ways, yet we carry the values of complex activity networks with us as we learn and research, as we move from space to space. A third place we see this blurring of boundaries is in the overt overlap of methods: Richard Haswell and Bob Broad each argue for qualitative researchers to consider using quantitative methods, and vice versa, as the situation demands. The many discussions housed here illustrate that writing research is indeed a rich, dynamic, and multipositioned enterprise.

The following chapters describe the methods writing studies researchers use in order to capture the complexity of this enterprise.

### Origins of This Collection

This collection is the result of a conversation that began in the spring of 2007, when Lee learned she would teach a graduate seminar on research methods the following fall semester. This was her first foray into teaching such a course, the sole methods course required of students enrolled in her home program. Lee understood her charge to include introducing graduate students to a contemporary landscape of writing research and helping them think about why this landscape may be a dominant one. As Lee set about determining what texts, discussions, and questions might best serve the needs of rising researchers, she reached out to Mary P., who had done similar investigative work for methods courses she had taught at her home institutions.

In the months that followed, we discussed both enduring questions and recent changes to the field in order to understand what, exactly, is included under the umbrella of writing research today. In the process, we examined the methodological extensions and innovations that coincided with research into contemporary practices, such as research that sought to reimagine how technology has contributed to our always-evolving understandings of what we consider writing, how we conduct our research, and where we publish our findings. We privileged work that speaks to diverse audiences and influences on our classroom practices and that represents the explosion of research into the extracurriculum. Yet, when we searched for collections to help us present these efforts to our students, we were surprised by the continued reliance on texts from twenty-plus years earlier and two in particular: Janice Lauer and J. William Asher's *Composition Research: Empirical Designs* (1988) and Gesa E. Kirsch and Patricia A. Sullivan's *Methods and Methodology in Composition Research* (1992) (see the chapter by Rickly in the current volume). These were foundational texts for our own understandings about researching writing, so we were pleased to be in familiar territory, but much has changed since these volumes were published. Where were the reflective, generalist, edited collections that captured the methodological innovations within the field of writing studies?

Now, there have been many important developments to the body of literature on writing research. In the last few years alone, the field has benefited from edited handbooks on and syntheses of research: Charles MacArthur, Steve Graham, and Jill Fitzgerald, *Handbook of Writing*



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