Adding the Field to the Work: A Dramatic Re-enactment of a Qualitative Research Seminar

Newcomers to qualitative research soon encounter its fundamental paradox: to learn how to do it, one has to do it. For designers of qualitative practice seminars, this is an even more stubborn paradox. In a semester’s time, such a fieldwork course must provide a manageable yet meaningful experience in what has been broadly and variously termed (among many other names) “qualitative-descriptive” (Lauer and Asher), “ethnographic” (Calkins; Bishop “I-Witnessing”), or “naturalistic” (Denzin and Lincoln 4, 9; Lincoln and Guba) inquiry. Although these adjectival designations do denote some methodological differences, these research modes all privilege the researcher’s personal

Kathy Boardman is Associate Professor of English and Director of the Core Writing Program at the University of Nevada, Reno. Jane Detweiler is Associate Professor of English at the University of Nevada, Reno. Her research and teaching focuses on rhetorical theory, writing in the disciplines, and the intersections of professional and public discourses. Heidi Emmerling is a PhD candidate at the University of Nevada, Reno, where she also teaches composition for the Department of English. Heidi Estrem is an assistant professor at Eastern Michigan University. In addition to assisting with the coordination of the first-year writing program, she teaches a wide range of courses focused on writing practice, pedagogy, and theory. Brad E. Lucas recently completed his PhD and is currently a Lecturer at the University of Nevada, Reno, with interests in composition history, political rhetoric, and research methodologies. Katherine M. Schmidt is a lecturer and doctoral candidate at the University of Nevada, Reno. She is currently writing her dissertation.
experience with certain individuals (as in case studies) or a given context (as in ethnographies or teacher-research). Without exception, these forms of qualitative research rely on some combination of context-sensitive interviewing, observing, interpreting of texts, and other time- and energy-intensive, rigorously subjective means of collecting—and understanding—information. In addition to exploring the theoretical frames that warrant such modes of research, a practice-oriented seminar on these methods must also respond to some basic challenges faced by novice researchers as they conduct “personal experience” field research for the first time.

In the following written construction, four graduate students and two faculty members attempt to represent the dilemmas, practicalities, tensions, and rewards encountered through participation in a seminar in qualitative methods and practice, a course that involved student-researchers in reading, reflection, and five weeks of fieldwork. Our non-traditional polylogue blends our personal anecdotes, quotations from course readings, excerpts from field process writing, and reflective commentary on what we learned from first-time fieldworking. This text serves, as well, as one artifact from our collective and individual experiences. As with any singular piece of data, it does not represent the entire experience. However, we hope this format helps readers explore the issues impinging on field research with novice researchers; we trust that this multi-voiced narrative reveals an argument, as well, about the complex rewards of qualitative research.

Six main voices have been woven through the polylogue. For each graduate student researcher, issues surfaced particular to her or his research project. Thus, what follow are the four main scenes, in which, for actual dramatization at the CCCC 2000 meeting, the other graduate students and two professors filled several roles: themselves, subjects in research studies, and published voices on qualitative research. For clarity in this version, we have simply entered names for speakers other than the writers, knowing that readers interested in their own re-enactment will find ways to fill parts. All names used here for participants are pseudonyms, research participants’ actual words are clearly marked with quotation marks, and other, unmarked scripting is close but creative paraphrase based on the researcher’s memories, notes, and transcripts.

In both form and content—though these obviously cannot be divided—this polylogue attempts to address some of the complications that still face us as researchers who describe the literate lives of other people, and those of us who educate new researchers to do so. During the year that we six ventured out into the risky mutual endeavor of learning qualitative research (but, alas, too late for us to include them in the course syllabus), several substantial publications emerged that underscore the centrality of critical narrative and reflective research practice in composition studies.
(e.g., Bishop Ethnographic, Kirsch Ethical, Addison and McGee Feminist, among others). With the writers of and in these volumes, we would point to the necessity of telling the halting, often amusing, sometimes painful stories of research as practice, stubbornly local and ultimately, a key source of self-shaping knowledge for the novice and point of reflection for the experienced researcher. Like Margaret Ewing et al., we teachers and students—researchers all—have shared moments in which

the importance of the individual researcher’s experience has come home to us with respect to issues of control and flexibility, the value of subjectivity and intuition, and the necessity for mindfulness of the ethical implications of what we do. Important to us are the implications for training researchers to honor their own experiences. . . . Our spontaneous, unstructured, and interactive experience may uncover insights not likely reached by the direct path. (125)

As much as qualitative inquiry is a doing, we would argue along with Wendy Bishop (Ethnographic), it is also a way of being in the world. And so it is that our little drama will work to focus attention on how we were in those moments of greatest anxiety, risk, and trust—even as we necessarily dramatize where we are now, remembering for our readers, drawing out the themes from our collected data and our lived experience.

THE RESEARCHERS’ PROLOGUES

Heidi Estrem’s scene focuses on the dilemmas of representation, fairness, and goodwill that arose for her as a still-novice qualitative researcher. Her methodology is marked by the difficulty of balancing, in the text of the research report, the interests of all those involved in any qualitative project—the participants, the secondary and tertiary participants, the other stakeholders, and the researcher’s own perspective. One may be invited into a research site, be welcomed by all participants, and yet still face struggles over how to fairly represent lived lives in words.

Brad Lucas explores the ethical concerns about trust and loyalties that arise when novice researchers conduct fieldwork within their own institutions. Graduate student researchers can be caught between their goals as teachers and their survival as students. Brad thought he was taking a relatively safe route for his research on novels in the first-year writing class, drawing on debates over the use of literature in composition classrooms. He concluded, however, that he had not adequately considered the teachers whose classes he would be observing—or how he was positioned in relation to them and the rest of the university. He felt underprepared to write about fellow teachers for audiences that were literally close to home. Concerns about friendships, the trustworthiness of his observations, and possible
repercussions for participants surrounded him as he attempted to negotiate how he would report his observations to co-researchers and faculty.

**Katherine Schmidt** considers the messiness in human-to-human research. While designing research questions and frameworks is difficult enough, it is important also to remember how these facets come to life as we make contact with human participants. As Gwen Gorzelsky reminds us: “Like life, ethnography is a messy practice” (58); and for the novice qualitative researcher, this messiness is difficult to manage. While our starting points often appear benign, points of contact suddenly make conceptual framework boundaries seem inadequate. Not only do we encourage participants to tell stories that are inextricably bound to gender, ethnicity, economics, and values, but in doing so, we imply that what they consider mundane is exciting—that their everyday routines are worth relaying in detail. How far can we go before our qualitative composition research begins to resemble a psychological or sociological profile? To develop a working relationship with others requires one to maintain a double consciousness: one as a thoughtful researcher observing, and the other as one who is being observed by colleagues, program directors, human subjects committees, and the research participants themselves.

**Heidi Emmerling’s** focus is time utilization. Mara Casey, Kate Garretson, Carol Peterson Haviland, and Neal Lerner have documented that ethnographic dissertations almost “invariably exceed the most pessimistic time projections” (117). Doctoral students who elect ethnographic studies generally spend at least one year longer than those who elect other research methodologies. Time pressures are even more acute when the qualitative study is done as a seminar project: the semester is only fifteen weeks long. For students to experience qualitative research and still accomplish it within the confines of the seminar time frame, the course necessarily must limit the amount of time spent in the field. The challenge is to choose a workable topic and design a meaningful qualitative methodology that allows for completion in the limited time frame. How many participants will we be able to profile? How many hours of interviews will we conduct, transcribe, and interpret? How can we get just the right amount of data so that we can make meaning from it and still be able to compile, arrange, interpret, and write it up in a semester? Questions of time face all ethnographic researchers.

**Jane Detweiler** and **Kathy Boardman**, faculty colleagues in the composition program, were co-teachers of the Qualitative Research Seminar portrayed in this polilogue. As director of the first-year writing program, Kathy was also the teaching supervisor for the graduate student researchers. The instructors and students observed by Brad Lucas and Heidi Emmerling were also in the first-year writing program.
THE POLYLOGUE

The polylogue’s set is fairly simple. At left, six chairs are arranged in a half circle, open to the audience at one side. These might represent students’ chairs in a graduate seminar. To the far right stands a small table with one chair; this might be an office or a graduate student’s study. At center front, three chairs have been placed in a row; under the chairs lie various books and objects—props to be used in the polylogue. Jane and Kathy step to the center of the room; the other four take seats in the circle.

Kathy: Our Qualitative Research seminar met for fifteen weeks, from January to May 1999. We began planning this course nearly a year ahead of time. Not only did we have to think about the shape and content of the seminar, but we also had to think about possible sites and plan site coordination; we began the Institutional Review Board (IRB), or Human Subjects, paperwork. We chose three sites: the first-year writing program, the writing center (both on campus) and an alternative high school in our community. Although the politics of choosing the on-campus sites weren’t uncomplicated, the high school site involved different logistics and more delicate negotiations. We had to convince the high school teachers that we weren’t going to arrive with white coats and clipboards and judge them. Apparently these teachers had previously experienced researchers who only wanted to investigate why their students were “defective.” Our English Department’s pre-existing and ongoing internship agreement with this high school helped things along considerably.

Jane: Kathy and I met early in the summer with administrators at the alternative high school, and then again in the fall with the teachers, explaining our project and soliciting volunteers. (One catch-22 was this: we had to have IRB approval before we actually got the volunteers, but we had to have site approval in order to get IRB approval.) We sought Human Subjects approval during the fall—the semester before the Qualitative Research seminar began. The process took two months and was completed a month and a half before the class started. We had to think of a wide range of possibilities but also frame the project closely enough so that IRB felt they could approve it. Our other goal was to open options for students to do projects that interested them, projects for which they could explore a range of research questions and methods.

We also started thinking about possible readings for the class, and read from each other’s recommendations during the summer and fall. We planned a class calendar that allowed for five weeks’ preparation, five weeks in the field, and five weeks to write up. But right up to the last minute, there were other issues that had to be addressed.

ADDING THE FIELD TO THE WORK 83
Kathy and Jane are now seated center front, passing papers and books to each other. The four graduate students, still seated in the circle of chairs, are also looking through papers and books.

**Kathy:** But do you think they’ll have enough time to complete a project in only fifteen weeks?

**Jane:** Well, we’ve taken care of as many of the preliminary decisions and as much of the paperwork as possible—things they’d normally have had to address on their own. And we’re cutting back on the reading load because they’ll be doing as well as reading.

**Kathy:** Right, and we’ll be using class time to walk through some parts of the process—like observation exercises, coming up with good research questions and a conceptual framework, practicing interviews, and so on—

**Jane:** We’ll help them come up with manageable projects; and besides, when do you ever have enough time to do everything you want to do in a qualitative research project? But what I worry about is this: some of them are going to be researching awfully close to home, maybe even in their colleagues’ classrooms.

**Kathy:** Yes, I’m concerned, too. Morale is so important, and I don’t want the teachers in our program to feel as if they’re under surveillance, as if I’m using my students to watch them.

*Jane and Kathy continue flipping through papers as Heidi Estrem looks up and begins speaking, as if to herself.*

**Heidi Estrem:** I can’t believe I’m here, taking another seminar, and delaying work on my dissertation. I have nearly completed an ethnographically-oriented dissertation, but I feel as though I know less now about how to conduct a naturalistic research project than I did when I embarked on it two years ago. I feel so jaded, so lacking in confidence. I thought that doing qualitative research for my dissertation would leave me with a better sense of how to do it the next time, but now as I’m writing up my dissertation, I feel less sure than ever. After this seminar, though, I’ll finally know how to do a qualitative research project. I’ll undertake a smaller project, and I will be able to try out my ideas on other seminar members. Now I will be more alert to every ethical dilemma that springs from working with human subjects. I’ll learn more methods. I’ll definitely, finally figure out how to categorize, sort, and file. Oh, yes, and this time I’ll
know how to be clearer with my participants, and I'll be confident enough to establish my authority as a researcher. This time I'll be sure to get it right.

Jane (speaking separately to Kathy): We'll have to be careful to put these issues up front so that our students aren't blindsided by them. Also, some of the readings deal with ethical complications of researching in familiar places.

Brad (looks at the audience and speaks as if to himself): Theory and practice—I'll do a perfect blend of what's in the journals with what we do here at the University! Some people here include literature in their composition courses, so I'll just see how novels "go over" in English 102. I'll study two classes. Three or four weeks, right here in the department, and it'll be no problem. In and out. They'll never know I was there. I'll be a "participant-observer," so no "culture shock," and my findings will be really useful. And I can feed whatever I find right back into the writing program.

Kathy (speaking to Jane): What about interview and observation techniques? Since time is so short, they'll have to get them right the first time. Or at least they won't have week after week to learn by experience what is a bad question.

Katherine (speaking to her three classmates): I definitely want to have gender serve as my lens. My plan is to look at how males and females read and write similarly and differently. I am a bit worried, though, because my socio-epistemic self says that two or three people aren't going to cut it for my project. I'll need lots of people to study—it's my only solution for coming up with something that other people will find valuable.

Jane (speaking to Kathy as she considers her comments about time): Yes, and even with a short qualitative project, you're going to run up against problems you didn't foresee. We'll have to do the best we can to help them think through their projects, and support them as they conduct the research. We'll be there to answer questions and help them think through alternatives.

Kathy: Besides, if we're going to have them learn by doing, we can't try to protect them from all those sorts of things. We can minimize negative effects, but we can't avoid stress entirely.

Jane: One stressful thing is going to be coming up with a report at the end of the class. It's such a short developmental process that it'll be hard to manage all the data and focus a discussion.
Heidi Emmerling (speaking to classmates): I’m so excited about doing this research. I’ll look at the connection between class time and student writing, and student-instructor perceptions of class time utilization. Best of all, I can do it all right here at the University of Nevada, Reno, so I don’t have to stress about the hassles one might encounter with “entering the field”—problems like finding volunteers, for example. This is my own community, and my fellow TAs will be just as excited as I am about this research. This will be groundbreaking stuff! It will totally revamp the way teachers teach, and we’ll all learn how to motivate students so they will never want to miss another class! It’s going to be tough turning volunteers away.

Kathy (to Jane): And then they’ll have to worry about what their research participants will think about how they’ve been represented in the writeup.

Jane: Their journaling, along with the exercises we give them, should help them pinpoint thought-provoking moments in their observations. This will give them a head start on focusing their data. Then we’ll allow for two rounds of response to the drafts in and outside of class.

Kathy: Well, just as they’re going to have to do with their projects, we’ll set the course up as best we can, wait and see what happens, and make adjustments if necessary.

Heidi Emmerling: The Problem of Time

All six participants sit down in the half-circle of chairs. They are at a meeting of the Qualitative Research seminar.

Kathy: So, who’d like to share their conceptual framework first?

Heidi Emmerling (leaping to her feet): I would love to! The purpose of my study is to discover student and instructor perceptions of time in English 101 courses, using a descriptive case study design. I’ll have sixty students and three instructors revealing their perceptions related to class time utilization. I’ll sit in on three instructors’ classes. During class, I’ll log how much time was spent on each activity and record student comments regarding class time and activities. After each class, I’ll interview the instructors and all the students as well as survey all the students, using Likert scales, in order to get their assessment of how class time went. I’ll also see what happens after a student absence. I’ll ask how a student who misses class follows up on the absence. I could briefly interview each student who missed a class and ask what they thought they missed and what sorts of class activities they are reluctant or sorry to miss. From the students I work with, I’ll categorize by
gender in order to see how gender affects their perceptions. I envision the final product as a book.

**Katherine:** Do you see any problems entering the field?

**Heidi Emmerling:** Nope. That’s the beauty of this research. I’m right here.

**Brad:** Me, too. But aren’t you a little worried about how they’re going to feel about you researching them?

**Heidi Emmerling:** I think they’ll be thrilled to participate. Wouldn’t you be? I feel really sorry for the rest of you who might have to start really early just to get to your “field.”

**Heidi Estrem:** No kidding. I don’t know how we’re going to prepare for entering the field and do all this reading.

**Heidi Emmerling:** Since I have more time, I’ll get a jump on our class reading assignments.

**Brad:** Since we’re both looking at instructors in our own community, why don’t we collaborate on a survey? You could include questions pertaining to your research, and I’ll ask some questions about mine.

**Heidi Emmerling:** I think that’ll be great, Brad. We could survey all the teachers in the first-year writing program about their teaching philosophies. More participants—that will make our research so-o-o much better.

**Jane:** Getting back to entering the field: how might you adjust this conceptual framework if your schedule doesn’t mesh with the other instructors’? Or what about if, as Brad suggested, some of your colleagues are a little nervous about your presence? Some instructors might believe your presence in their class will affect their teaching.

**Heidi Emmerling:** Hmm. I’m obviously going to have to eliminate all the instructors who teach on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday since I work off campus on those days. And our class meets on Tuesday afternoons, so I can’t work with teachers who teach on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. That leaves Tuesday and Thursday morning instructors who teach 101.

**Kathy:** Here’s the teaching schedule of instructors in that time frame. It looks like there are two, and one of them is very busy with his dissertation.
Heidi Emmerling: Okay, I’ll contact the other instructor.

Katherine: Do you think you’ll have time to interview all of the students in the whole class? I think I would feel really stretched if I interviewed twenty or so participants.

Heidi Emmerling: That’s a good point. Maybe I’ll just interview half a dozen.

Brad: Observing and Interpreting Peers
Brad sits in the middle of two teachers who are his participants. Imagine that, as he talks to one teacher, the other is to his back: these are separate interviews.

Brad (speaking to the audience): Weeks after completing the field research, I talked to the teacher colleagues who let me observe their classes. I asked them about the issues that had concerned me. I was relieved that I hadn’t brought undue stress to them, but I also found that my fears were somewhat justified. One told me she would have felt like she was under surveillance if the seminar professors had been observing her class. (Brad turns to face the first teacher, Robin.)

Robin: “At first, perhaps a bit naively, I figured the pseudonym would keep my anonymity. Then, especially after I finally read the rough draft of the paper, I realized that was a pretty silly idea. I certainly had a few “oh shit” moments when it finally occurred to me that Kathy and Jane would know exactly who you were talking about, but all that happened after the class was done. The discussions we had [pause] alleviated a lot of concern on my part. In fact, your presence in the room was always appreciated in what came to feel like enemy territory over the course of the semester. If I was influenced by anything, it was our friendship, because I think I continued to view you as a friend, not necessarily as a researcher.”

Brad (to audience): The other teacher told me he trusted me as a person, but that my very presence probably had an effect on what happened in his class. (Turns to face the second teacher, Bruce.)

Bruce: “I’m sure there was some effect, knowing that a colleague would be in the classroom and would read my comments on student papers. I don’t believe I did so consciously, but it’s possible that an instructor would take more care in designing lesson plans or commenting on papers for those times when he’s going to be observed.”
**Brad (to audience):** So everything had worked out after all, and I wasn't just being paranoid. Even though I was just observing students, it did matter that I was doing research in their classes, and they were conscious of my report to other audiences. But what if I had recorded everything I saw? What if I had noted "bad news" and incorporated it in my report? When we did exercises in seminar by writing descriptions of each other, it was hard to portray someone I knew well, and here I was, going into two classrooms to describe everything I saw, about people I knew well.

**Robin (to Brad):** "Well, you're in composition, so you might have better insight into this than I do."

**Bruce (to Brad):** "That's pretty cool that composition lets you study teaching, and do this sort of thing."

**Brad (to audience):** Uh-oh, now there's another problem. The teachers I'm observing are in the Literature program, and here I am the composition student seeing how literature is being used in the composition classroom. (To teachers) So, one thing we need to do is to figure out a pseudonym for you because I will be writing up my report, and I'll need to refer to you by some name. Also, what did you think of the physical descriptions I emailed you?

**Robin:** "I didn't have time to look at it. Can I email you back?"

**Bruce:** "Looked great. Any name's fine—I don't care."

**Brad (standing to face audience):** So no real problems, weeks into the research, and I've checked with them on my representations. Of course, thinking back, maybe I should have emphasized that the reports would be read in the seminar by other grad students, and by Jane and Kathy. And then there's the books—anyone who browsed the program's website would see who was using what books in class. How much does everyone in the seminar know? Have they figured out who I'm researching? Should I be sneaking into the classroom when I observe? Brad rejoins the larger circle. Brad and Katherine cluster together as if talking about a text.

**Jane:** How do you think Brad's project is going?

**Kathy:** It seems OK. I'm interested in what he's finding out about how teachers approach reading in their writing classes.
Brad (to Katherine in a separate conversation): You all probably know who I’m working with by now, don’t you?

Katherine: Well, sure, and I’m curious about how other people deal with their students. Who wouldn’t be? And it’s not like you’ve told us anything bad, or given us all that much detail about the teachers, so there’s no harm.

Brad (to audience): Hmm, and maybe that’s something I should keep an eye on. As for Jane and Kathy, they probably know about all the TAs, and it’s not like the folks I’m working with are bad teachers, but still, I don’t want to give away anything. As I thought about my relationships with my teacher-subjects, I read a chapter about “ethnographic dissertations” and Mara Casey’s struggle with a colleague:

Mara Casey et al.: “Ethnographic theses and dissertations almost inevitably challenge researchers’ abilities to position themselves as ‘outsiders’ to their research sites. Mara reluctantly agreed to finish the study without Shelley’s response, and she and Shelley planned to collaborate on a book. However, when Shelley saw the completed study of her classroom and decided that Mara had done a ‘hatchet’ job on her and her teaching, both the friendship and the planned book collaboration ended” (117).

Brad (to audience): No hatchet jobs from me, I promised myself. But I started to feel compromised from too many sides—I wanted to do good research, do work toward my dissertation, impress my mentors, and not disturb the classes I was observing. I knew my notes, reflections, and other documents would be turned in at the end of the semester, and I started to wonder about what all was at stake in my harmless little research project. Things were getting a bit too meta-meta-meta for me. Foucault’s panopticon kept popping into my head, with the concentric circles of observation used for prisons and experiments.

Robin: He was watching my class.

Bruce: And he was watching my class.

Brad: And I was also observing their students, but I was only a co-researcher. I can only do research with support from a faculty member.

Katherine: And he was telling the seminar about his observations.

Kathy: And I was keeping an eye on our student researchers and helping
with their observations and keeping an eye on their impact on the first-year writing program.

_Jane:_ And I was keeping an eye on our student researchers and helping them with their observations and directing Brad’s dissertation. And the IRB, representing the University, had been promised that everyone would be treated well as human subjects.

_Brad:_ And anything I wrote down was, in theory, subject to review. The documentation and paper trail of research from the IRB is necessary to protect the students I was observing, but my actions seemed observable from several directions. The IRB monitors the researchers who observe and direct student-teacher-researchers, who in turn monitor themselves while observing the fellow student-teachers, and—of course—their undergraduate students. How should I protect my colleagues? Easy. I just won’t observe everything I see. I’ll not-see what I see fit.

So I decided to sort of look away whenever anything bad happened in the classes I was observing. I was studying the students, not the teachers, so I stopped making note of the moments when I thought teachers made errors of judgment, when they imposed their ideology on students, when they asked ambiguous questions and were frustrated by the answers. I chose to report only what could be reported without betraying my loyalties to my teacher-colleagues.

_Katherine:_ We see whatever we want to, we start selecting material the minute we start taking notes because we can’t catch everything. It’s like Wendy Bishop’s article, the one where she writes that “all research methods and research reports are rhetorical . . . [and] all research relies on persuasion, including ethnography” (149).

_Brad (to audience):_ Yeah, but I’m not going to say anything about this, because if I talk about the problems I saw in class today, then I’m revealing what I’m trying to protect. Great. So now, not only am I censoring my notes, but I’m censoring myself in the seminar. Maybe what I saw in class wasn’t so bad after all.

_Heidi Emmerling (Moves to center, and faces audience):_ I’ve been to three classes so far. A whopping two students volunteered for my study. I guess my participants will consist of one instructor and two students. As it is, I’m having a hard enough time managing to squeeze in interview time before or after class with these participants. Furthermore, not only am I conducting research, I’m learning to conduct research by taking this seminar. That
involves lots of reading and meeting the requirements for the class in addition to the time necessary to do this qualitative research.

I guess more isn’t always better when it comes to participants in qualitative research. Also, I’m finding that a balance of email interviews and face-to-face interviews allows flexibility for all those involved and also gives me richer input from the participants. They can answer candidly without fear of being overheard, and give more contemplative answers because they reply at their leisure. Best of all, I don’t have to transcribe all those tapes when I have some email interviews—all I have to do is cut and paste the dialogue.

**Katherine: Finding the Right Questions**

*All six participants are back in the semicircle, meeting as a seminar.*

**Katherine:** I met my two participants last week. They’re both fifteen, gang members. They’ve had rough lives.

**Brad:** How’d you get that from them already?

**Katherine:** I saw they had tattoos, and the conversation spiraled from there. But more importantly, I brought them breakfast-combos with OJ from Jack in the Box. I can’t wait to get back to the school to talk with them on Thursday. I’ve brainstormed nearly twenty questions, and I think they’ll have fun with them.

**Jane:** We talked a lot last week about your main research question. Were you able to narrow yours, Katherine?

**Katherine:** Well, it was hard to do, but I—

**Heidi Emmerling:** —what was your question again?

**Katherine:** Last week it was huge! My foundational question was something like: How does gender affect your literacy development?

**Heidi Emmerling:** Yeah, that is huge. You could spend ten years researching that one thing.

**Katherine:** Well, I’ve narrowed it to consider how these two females, as case studies—not as universal examples—have come to develop their literacy, and how being female plays into this. *(Katherine passes out sheets to those in class.)* These are my initial questions for them for Thursday.
Kathy: (as papers are being passed around): OK, but that still sounds rather large. However, you might not feel just how big it is until you meet with your participants on Thursday. Katherine stands beside one of her participants and speaks to the audience.

Katherine: This isn’t easy to do. If I make my question any narrower, what will I really find? I want to uncover something exciting, something new. (Katherine sits down with her participant and places her sheet of questions in front of her. Katherine turns on her microrecorder.)

Katherine: So, Araceli, how do you think that being a female—well, being a girl—affects the way you read and write?

Araceli: Huh?

Katherine: Let me narrow this a bit: what about just the way you read? Does being a girl affect that?

Araceli (after a short silence): I don’t know what you mean.

Katherine: Umm, well, do you think that you read differently than guys do?

Araceli: No.

Katherine: Not at all?

Araceli: No.

Katherine (standing to face the audience): I have no idea what to do. She’s not getting it—I mean, she’s really not getting it. If I can’t get the first question answered, there’s absolutely no way that any of these other questions will work. I need to think fast. (Katherine sits, shoves list of questions aside, and speaks to the student-participant.) OK, let’s shift gears here. Think back to when you were little. Do you remember your parents reading to you?

Araceli: No. My dad’s been in prison since I was a baby.

Katherine (to audience): Jane and Kathy warned us that sensitive issues might spring up, and as it is right now, I don’t see how Araceli’s father’s life in prison would be OK to talk about at this point. Is that smart? (To student) So, what about your mom?
**Araceli:** Well, she’s always worked a lot—real late hours. She only reads to me when I get in trouble.

**Katherine:** What do you mean? What does she read to you?

**Araceli:** The Bible. She gets real mad at me sometimes for stuff I do with my homies. That’s the only book we got in the house.

**Katherine:** Well, let me ask you some questions to help you think about when you were little. It’ll help you to think back. Do you remember books being in your house when you were young?

**Araceli:** No.

**Katherine:** Did you ever, at all, see a kid’s book when you were little?

**Araceli (after a short silence):** Well, yeah. At my grandma’s house.

**Katherine:** OK. Tell me about that.

**Araceli:** What do you want to know? There were just lots of books in the playroom.

**Katherine:** Well, did you ever take a book to your grandma and ask her to read to you?

**Araceli:** No, because she was always mad at us.

**Katherine:** Mad at who?

**Araceli:** My cousin and me. We tore all of the pages out of the books.

**Katherine:** Why did you do that?

**Araceli:** ‘Cause my cousin was doing it, and she said, “Look.” So I helped her ‘cause I thought she was cool. My grandma was really mad. And my mom was too. That’s why we don’t have any books in our house.

**Katherine (standing to face the audience, leaving her participant):** Deborah Brandt would love this story, and luckily I had sense enough to appreciate it. If I had remained committed to making my gender frame work, I could have missed the very real stories that my participants had to
share. But that telling took a great deal of letting go on my part—lots of talk and lots of give and take. This one story served as cornerstone to a new way of speaking with my participants. I discovered that the authentic treasures prevalent in their daily lives were invisible because, to them, they were simply not important. Luckily I made this discovery only four weeks into the course, and the twelve weeks to follow gave way to a framework that I could never have planned: one that examined the literacy habits within their gang.

HEIDI ESTREM: WRITING UP THE STUDY

Heidi Estrem, at the table, is alone in her study. The other polylogue participants line up behind her, ready to play her participants. Heidi Emmerling will represent a clock. (When this polylogue was performed at CCCC 2000 in Minneapolis, Jane wore a sign that identified her as “Helen Dale.” A similar sign was to identify Kathy as “Thomas Newkirk.” However, Tom Newkirk graciously agreed to play himself in this scene, a gesture for which the writers are still most grateful.)

Heidi Estrem (thinking aloud): OK, here I go. I’ve got my field notes, my weekly reflections, my in-class writing about my project, the transcripts from the interviews with my two case study participants. I’ve learned so much about hope, transitions, and the complications of literacy by becoming a participant-observer in a transitional classroom for recently paroled teens. A rough draft of this is due in two days? No problem. I know, because of my work on my dissertation project, that it’ll be challenging to commit this to paper. But this time will be different...

Heidi Emmerling steps forward and moves her arms like a large clock to show time passing.

Heidi Estrem (still thinking aloud): I’m stuck again on how to describe a teacher. I empathize so much with the students’ perspective that I don’t think I’m describing Mr. Smith fairly. Maybe I’ll look again at my Week One field notes: “Mr. Smith is relaxed, jovial, yet several times in the hours I’m there he’ll have to pull students aside to talk about not fighting or not taunting each other.” How can I represent this undertow? What is it, really? How will I describe the classroom so that others can see it, feel it, experience it? How can I be fair to the classroom culture and the relationships among students and the teacher, long established before I showed up?

Helen Dale: “Part of what makes such research so unsettling is that the researcher frequently faces competing loyalties and treacherous politics. Does one owe allegiance to an institution such as a university? To a teacher who has agreed to have us study her [his] class? To the students we so often
observe? Qualitative researchers often must make decisions in which individuals’ or groups’ needs take precedence over those of another individual or group. The choices researchers make are not between good and evil, but between two goods. This creates dilemmas of fidelity” (78).

**Heidi Estrem:** Yes, I do have a dilemma. I see his classroom as a positive place. In fact, here’s what I wrote after Week Two: “I love the language of this classroom. There’s so much talk I can’t keep up. This classroom’s overflowing with so many good things—brightly colored student work on the walls, soft music and a calm atmosphere, a teacher that’s in control and firm, and yet laughs with his students at other points.” But then I hear my case study participants:

**Katrina:** I want to go to regular high school. I feel like a bad person here, I don’t know, like you’re just locked in the classroom and your P.O.’s right upstairs. It’s like, dang, sometimes I feel Mr. Smith takes advantage because he knows we’re on parole and he knows they’re upstairs, ‘cause he’ll be like, “well, you wanna get suspended, you wanna go to your parole officer?”

**Heidi Estrem:** And I can’t forget the other student either:

**Mourecio:** Yeah, this feels way different. They make it seem like we’re still locked up, you know, and we have to run under their rules, under what they have to say. But what they really don’t understand is that we’re out, you know, and it’s a free world . . . you know they can tell you to go upstairs whenever they want. You’re locked up whenever they say you’re locked up. So it holds you back from doing what you wanna do sometimes . . . sometimes it’s good, but sometimes it’s kind of bad. It makes me feel weird sometimes like, oh, God, people telling me what to do, you know, especially when they’re not my mom and dad.

**Heidi Estrem:** So how do I describe this classroom? It’ll be a complicated description, one that shows the uncomfortable tensions of teaching in this complex site. You know, I want to show the positive aspects of his teaching, too.

**Thomas Newkirk:** “Anyone who spends a great deal of time in a teacher’s classroom . . . will observe practices that seem ineffective . . . [A]s part of the initial agreement, the researcher should state a willingness to bring up issues, problems, or questions” (13).
Heidi Estrem: Is my description really one of ineffective practices, or is it a reflection of the tensions inherent in a classroom like this? Or does it just reflect my muddled thinking at this point?

Thomas Newkirk: It may be either, but “the researcher should grant the teacher . . . the opportunity to respond to interpretations of problematical situations” (13).

Heidi Estrem: But at what point should I pass on a written document to the participants? I mean, what if I gave him an early draft that was really just that—a thinking-through first draft that ultimately changed? I’m not even sure this is bad news. I have talked to Mr. Smith about these students all along. . . . I’m glad that I can run this by my classmates first. I’m just going to do it. I’ll just describe. Objectively. I’ve got to get something down. So, here it is. I guess I’ll see what my fellow seminar members have to say. (All remove their props and sit in the seminar circle.)

Heidi Estrem: I’m working on this section that describes the teacher. Here it is. (She passes copies around to everyone in the circle.) I think I’ve got it pretty well cast. I’m just describing here, so see what you think: “As much as Mr. Smith cares for these students, he also controls them and their language. (He controls the phone, deciding who can use it and for what purposes.) He controls their writing, telling them how many sentences of each type to include in their essays. He tells them to be quiet and write and then comes over and talks to me in a conversational tone of voice. They are often reminded to be quiet and work and yet, visitors come in unannounced—parole officers, counselors, job-training people—and interrupt with loud voices. Mr. Smith answers the phone and talks obviously about one of the students while all are quiet and listening, powerless. There is little privacy and little power in the lives of these students.” So—what do you all think?

Katherine: Well . . . I wonder if you could write from the perspective of this classroom as just another transition. Students here are restless, it seems, because they know they’re not in real high school. So no matter the classroom setup or the teacher, they’d be chafing, right?

Brad: You said earlier that it’s a good classroom, that the teacher does good work, and that there’s no doubt these are troubled kids. So what happened to the good teacher?
Heidi Estrem: Um . . . I did want to show the good. Maybe I didn’t do that enough. But I also wanted to portray how even a good teacher is complicated and holds a lot of power.

Heidi Emmerling: But the students say that, right? Do you need to? Brad takes a seat in a single chair and pretends to write. Heidi Estrem moves back toward the desk as she talks. Heidi Emmerling stands between them, portraying the clock (time passing).

Heidi Estrem: Maybe not. I thought I was trusting my data, letting it speak, but maybe at this point I’m still just in there too much. I know this is better; it’s much more balanced. . . . OK, they were right. I thought I was being descriptive and perhaps I was. But it wasn’t an accurate description, not really. Even matters of word choice seem to hold so much weight. Still, I’ll try again. I’ll work to show how the students’ perspectives as parolees affected their perception of the teacher and the classroom. That’s ultimately what I’m attempting to do anyway. Heidi Emmerling moves her arms to show time passing.

Heidi Estrem: OK, maybe I’m getting somewhere with this draft: “Although the case study subjects were successful students in this class, it held too many reminders that they weren’t quite free—yet. Both felt the unseen presence of parole officers upstairs and realized that other adults had a major say in how they lived their lives. Students in this class are often reminded to be quiet and work, and yet visitors come in unannounced (parole officers, counselors, job-training staff) and interrupt loudly. Mr. Smith answers the phone and talks obviously about one of them while all can hear.” I know this is better, more balanced. I still worry about giving it to Mr. Smith, though. He allowed, no, welcomed me into his classroom. Even these small details may seem hurtful to him. Heidi Estrem places sheets of paper into a manila envelope. Katherine takes the envelope from Heidi and delivers it to Brad, who plays Heidi’s teacher-participant, Mr. Smith.

Katherine: Mr. Smith, here’s your mail. (Brad takes the envelope, opens it, and peruses the papers.)

Mr. Smith: Hmm, here’s the written report from Heidi Estrem’s research project. Interesting. I wonder what she wrote. . . . Wow, I talk obviously about them on the phone? I guess I do. . . . but what else can I do? I can’t very well go out in the hall! And where’s any information from our long interview? She has certainly focused on the students. What about my
teaching? What about my efforts? I’m surprised at how strange it is to read about myself.

Heidi Estrem: So many audiences, once again: my case study participants, Mr. Smith, my seminar members, a future larger audience of teachers. But writing it up is again a complex, difficult process for me. I realize that people’s good will in letting me into their ideas and experiences put me in a position of multiple responsibilities: to the feelings of my participants, to my audience, and to my own sense of what really happened.

Heidi Emmerling: Time Again

Brad and Heidi Estrem return to the seminar circle. Heidi Emmerling has pages of her manuscript and her research log.

Kathy (nodding to Heidi Emmerling): OK, Heidi. It’s your turn to share your draft. You’re the last one.

Heidi Emmerling (cringing, handing out a skimpy draft): I’m afraid there’s not much here. What I’ve found from my research is that students and teachers both perceive class time utilization as “just right.”

Jane: Did you expect things not to be “just right”?

Heidi Emmerling: I don’t know. It’s just not very earth-shattering. Who in the world is going to want to read that? There’s no way I can submit this—you’ll fail me!

Brad: What helped me was looking through my reflective writing in my process log.

Heidi Emmerling: Good idea! (Looking through log) Well, my log is mighty skimpy. I was so stressed for time that I didn’t do much here. Maybe if I had invested more time during the research, it would have paid off now. After all, one of the main things I’m learning in this class is that, as the researcher, I am an essential ingredient in the research. Maybe if I sit on this awhile, something will come to me.

Heidi Estrem: Actually, I think the information you have here is really interesting. As a beginning instructor, I would have loved to have something like this. But I’m wondering, have you had your participants read your draft yet? The final is due in a week.
Heidi Emmerling (facing audience): When am I going to find the time to write this up, have the participants look it over, have the instructors look it over, have the participants look it over again, then turn it in?

In my case, where my participants were on a similar schedule to mine, I found getting them to look it over before submitting it to my instructors, then giving them a final copy, to be problematic. After all, the paper is due at semester’s end. After the end of the semester, the participants are not accessible, especially the student participants.

CONCLUSION
Jane and Kathy move to the center seats, going over papers. The four others stay in their seats.

Jane: Well, now that the course is over, I’m pleased with what our students accomplished.

Kathy: Yes, I’m as proud of them as you are. They were pretty stressed out a few weeks ago, weren’t they? But things calmed down here at the end.

Jane: It made a big difference that they helped each other. Didn’t they do a great job of reading and responding to each other’s work outside and inside of class?

Kathy: If they’d tried to tear each other down, instead of being supportive and helpfully critical, it would have been impossible for anyone to finish.

Jane: That’s why I’m so pleased with this group. They knew the process and the difficulties, and they empathized with each other.

Kathy: The writing is fairly polished, considering the time constraints. Of course, none of this is ready to send off—

Jane: No, but they’ve already got some good, practical applications—maybe a start on a dissertation or some new ideas for an ongoing one . . .

Kathy: . . . or some good possibilities for presentations for the other first-year writing teachers. Some of these findings would be great to present at next fall’s new teacher orientation. I’m going to ask some of these folks right now if they are willing to be on the program . . .

Heidi Estrem: Quandaries of representation arise again and again for me as a researcher. What is bad news? It’s not always perfectly clear, and
certainly it's true that one person's "bad news" is another's "reasonable teaching practice." "Good" and "bad" teaching practices become increasingly local matters. It's very difficult to generalize beyond the immediate site. At what point should I bring a subject in for true co-interpretation? If I share my field notes, they may be unnecessarily shocked or saddened by my fleeting thoughts, questions, and conceptions of their classroom or teaching. If I share too early a draft, I may once again hurt them unintentionally through my own struggles with representation. The stakes are high when other humans agree to trust our pen.

**Brad:** So the paradox is that you have to do qualitative research to learn how to do it. Maybe a corollary to this is the researcher's position-dilemma: to get access and entry to a field site, we need to be trusted, but those places where we are already most trusted have the most ethical catch-22's and conflicts of interest. We need to tread lightly on the sacred spaces of friendship, collegiality, and peer relations. It's a tough place to be when we have to decide between what's ethical and what's considered better research. When we're on our own, such decisions might not be so difficult, but when we need people looking over our shoulders to help us out, there's a lot more at stake. Research done collaboratively opens many doors for worthwhile inquiry, but when there are observations of the observations, the relations between people become more and more tricky.

**Katherine:** There's a common saying in Hollywood: "Whenever you've got an animal or a child involved in the making of a movie, expect *everything* that you didn't expect." Talk about simplicity—we, as researchers, aren't so lucky. Not only do we face the multi-dimensional unpredictability that accompanies mere humanness, but we also can't wait it out until our actors can play the parts that we envision them playing. In my own study, because I was so intent upon looking at gender, I failed for several weeks to acknowledge the gang writings that were central in my participants' lives. Fortunately, their stories gnawed upon my initial research framework until I was finally able to "let go" and simply see something that had been invisible to me for many weeks. It seemed that as I moved from attempting to imagine their stories into a gender-literacy framework to finally letting go of my vision for the project, their stories began to find their own direction.

**Heidi Emmerling:** Well, I didn't write the book that I had originally envisioned. I had to rethink my conceptual framework by coming up with something manageable but still meaningful. I became immersed in this stuff. I lived and breathed the data. Even in just one semester, I started to
become weary of the project before it was all done. I even got to the point where I thought, “Ah, this stuff is so obvious—this will not be news to anyone.” I thought that I had oversimplified my plan. Indeed, my findings were neither dramatic nor surprising. It appeared that, in spite of some mismatches that I explored, instructors generally have the ability to gauge the appropriate amount of time to spend on a variety of activities. However, it was this very confirmation that was enlightening to new instructors. And the mismatches that were identified can usually be addressed, which was also reassuring to new instructors.

**JANE AND KATHY: THE TEACHERS’ EPILOGUE**

We hesitate to have “the last word,” since we had the “first word” of designing the qualitative research methods seminar in the first place, yet it seems that a final reflective word or two, a thoughtful pedagogical *epilogos*, might usefully gather the threads of this polylogue for our readers. After all, like our students, we too began with questions that set us off on quests: how do we teach a process that must be learned by doing? How much can be learned about this process from reading the products of research? Which of the many compelling texts available should we choose? How much time in the field is “enough”? How much discussion (of potential problems with one’s participants, for example) is necessary, responsible, and, well, not liable to overwhelm? How might we cultivate and protect the serious playfulness that makes qualitative research a joy as well as a challenge?

For us, as for our students, this research practice course was, by its very nature, a sustained, disciplined sort of learning: our questions anticipated and fostered theirs; their questions pushed us to relearn our practices; together, we practiced a highly specialized form of literacy as we inquired into the literacies shaping a few local scenes of learning. The readings and activities of the course framed qualitative research as systematic curiosity, played out on the grounds of life meeting life, person meeting person. And, as these new researchers re-enact in the preceding pages of our dramatized account, they took fullest advantage of the opportunity to work on—though certainly not to resolve—the pesky, difficult questions of meaning and action that compel us as teachers of writing.

The collaborative, sometimes humorous recounting in our polylogue attempts to illustrate how our students encountered the mysteries, mishaps, and sometimes miseries of what Linda Flower calls “observation-based research.” We could not—nor would we really want to—“protect” our students by anticipating every energizing or aggravating eventuality. Rather, the course was designed to provide a relatively structured, relatively low-risk environment in which the whole learner might be engaged and
present, insofar as this is possible amidst all the local pressures of a graduate student’s everyday life (a reasonable facsimile, therefore, of their academic futures, our researcher present). Such courses as ours are, of course, “artificial,” in the sense that they’re not as substantial a time and development commitment on the students’ part: the fifteen-week semester, with its five-week fieldwork component, is much more limited and compressed than the thesis or dissertation studies that are the usual introduction to qualitative research for many of us in composition. Further, our focus on literacy studies, not to mention the extensive planning of the projects’ potential range to accommodate human subjects review, certainly preemptively constrained the students’ methodological options as fieldworkers and the creative points of departure for their projects. Given all this, what might our experience with a very small seminar with very advanced students suggest to a wider community of our colleagues?

Despite the student enrollment pressures we all face, and the difficulty of running such a course even in research university settings, we feel it is important to offer these opportunities for our students at various levels. Those of us who are professors, surely, gained our research experience through a trial by fire: we learned-by-doing, usually with a dissertation project for which, of course, the stakes were much higher and process much lonelier. In addition to the mere nuts and bolts of method, a course such as ours foregrounds the collaborative learning that is crucial for new qualitative researchers (and for new teachers, for that matter). Over the course of the seminar, our students taught each other as much as we taught them about the delicate interpersonal dance of ethically-motivated observations of other people. This was especially the case because the students were working at different field sites; workshopping at various points in the research process seemed helpful to them and was certainly instructive to us, as we tried to nudge and hint when absolutely necessary, but not to force-feed advice continually.

Beyond fostering collaborative learning, the range of fieldwork sites also benefited our broader local learning community as well. Fieldwork can be a form of outreach, as in the case of our work in the high school sites; if it is handled with sensitivity, all parties to the effort might learn something about what is happening in the field site and in the home department of the researchers. Qualitative study in one’s own community—such as that Brad and Heidi Emmerling conducted in our department—offers opportunities for reflective inquiry within a program (here again, awareness of political complications and the privacy of individuals studied is fundamental). Surely, some of the insights our students derived might have been more easily accessible in readings, and they did often cite these materials as warrants for particular actions. But we would argue that confronting actual
situations taught them skills vital to both research and teaching, and the workshops then allowed them to share a broader range of experiences that no one of them could have had alone. Throughout, we teachers learned to trust our students’ choices—not that we distrusted them at the outset, but rather we fretted about their relative inexperience and wanted to help them avoid the worst fieldwork pitfalls if we could do so.

Our little drama also holds lessons for those who routinely use, or are considering using, some form of “ethnographic” research in their writing classrooms. Certainly, this approach offers great pedagogical advantages, such as the possibility of moving beyond purely text-based study, doing intriguing primary research, learning interviewing techniques, writing compelling “real world” observations, and so forth. Our students’ accounts, while obviously radically simplified for presentation here, point to the richness of the contexts they brought to the activity of observing, as well as of those theoretical contexts they developed as they encountered their field study contexts. These are success stories we teachers and our student colleagues tell, yes, but cautionary tales as well. Their narrative scenes reflect (on) the difficulties that student researchers face: consider the emotional and intellectual challenges raised as Brad and Heidi Estrem wrestle with conflicting representational obligations, or as Katherine struggles to relinquish her early framework, to feel the clumsiness of her initial line of questioning, and to really see the other possibilities of her participants’ literate lives, or as Heidi Emmerling confronts her problem—“So what? This isn’t anything earthshaking”—after investing so much time and effort in her field study. Perhaps it was the instructional possibilities embedded in these petit récits of research learning, with their way of countering, complicating, or complementing the grander narratives of methodology and tradition, that led one of our audience members at CCC 2000, Dorothy Winsor of Iowa State University, to request a copy of this script, which she then used successfully in the first meeting of her own qualitative methods seminar. (We thank her for encouraging us to seek publication.)

The immediacy and intimacy of the shared process—which we have attempted to capture here, with our interwoven vignettes—taught us all to appreciate the complexities of our learning situations as students, teachers, and researchers. Our final aim may be to offer insights into the literacy worlds of others; but before that can happen, we must allow those worlds to teach us how to study them with subtlety and sensitivity. We hope this multi-voiced representation of our processes helps continue the professional conversation about the ethics of novice researchers learning in the field. We know that further discussion of the issues we have raised, and of others like them, will be valuable for composition studies.

104 Composition Studies
WORKS CITED


“Bruce.” E-mail to Brad E. Lucas. 23 May 1999.


“Robin.” E-mail to Brad E. Lucas. 07 July 1999.
APPENDIX I

Course Description: Seminar in Qualitative Research Practice

As social theories of the composing process have emerged in Composition Studies, the field has recognized the value of qualitative research methods for studying literacy-in-context. This practicum provides an opportunity for new researchers to examine the philosophies that ground these qualitative methods, to reflect on ethical matters that arise in field research, and to design and conduct a small-scale observation-based study of literacy in an educational setting. In the course of conducting their studies, participants will be encouraged to describe and (re)define “literacy” as it occurs in their fieldwork sites, and thus to learn about how literacies are taught and learned.

Required Texts


Optional Methods Texts


Supplementary Article-Length Studies


Ewald, Helen Rothschild and David L. Wallace. “Exploring Agency in Classroom Discourse or, Should David Have Told His Story?” *College Composition and Communication* 45.3 (1994): 342-368.


Penrose and Geisler “Reading and Writing without Authority.” *College Composition and Communication* 45 (1994): 505-20.

