
Reviewed by Bryna Siegel Finer, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

In the past fifteen years, many excellent edited collections have made the field of Composition Studies easily accessible, compact, and portable. To name a few, Cross-Talk, The Norton Book of Composition Studies, and The Braddock Essays all collect the field’s most important primary works under varying themes and within a variety of contexts. Exploring Composition Studies: Sites, Issues, and Perspectives provides new essays that consider important primary texts in the field of composition, helping scholars new to any of Composition Studies’ constituent areas to locate the seminal texts in that area and to see how those texts converse with each other. Written by some of the field’s most prominent researchers, the chapters in Exploring Composition Studies provide what could be considered to be a quintessential portrait of where the field has been, where it is now, and where it could or should be headed. It is, no doubt, a reference book, much in the way that A Guide to Composition Pedagogies is, but while A Guide is a reference for teaching, this collection is a reference for scholarship. The collection shows us the different scholarly conversations, as well as the methodological approaches to that research, that are used under the diverse and ever-expanding umbrella of Composition Studies.

In the introduction to Exploring, Kelly Ritter and Paul Kei Matsuda make a promise to newcomers to “the enterprise of composition studies” (7): this collection of new essays will ease the “struggle” of trying “to understand diverse and growing constituencies and enduring questions in various sub-areas of composition studies” (1). The book delivers on this promise, and in fact it offers much more than that: insightful conversations about the field’s subareas that would be useful to any researcher or teacher, not just newcomers. As a whole, the book helps to define Composition Studies as a growing discipline that covers many constituents, from university-wide initiatives such as writing centers and writing across the curriculum, to pedagogical areas like teaching first-year writing or second-language writing, to administrative concerns like the changing roles of WPAs and assessment. In chapters that are more than just literature reviews, the writers in Exploring show not just how individual books or articles have been important in our disciplinary history, but how those publications converse with each other to create the meta-narratives of the field. Further, the chapters, often explicitly, ask readers to consider where these meta-narratives might, should, or will take composition research in the future.

Exploring is divided into two sections. The first section, “The State of the Field,” covers narratives of “‘locations’ wherein composition studies happens”
basic writing, second language writing, professional writing, writing across the curriculum, and writing program administration. The collection’s second section, “Innovations, Advancements, and Methodologies,” covers concepts and methodologies that span across the “locations” described in the first section: writing-about-writing pedagogies, transfer, assessment, digital composing, ethnography, archival research, and instructor education.

While many reviews of collections will offer a summary of each chapter of the book in the order in which they appear, what I noticed while linearly reading Exploring were the various methodologies used in presenting the material. Perhaps an unintended consequence of analyzing the various constituencies of the field is the revelation of the diverse methodological approaches we use in Composition Studies to understand the conversations we are having. The book serves as a methodological guide, demonstrating the various frameworks we use and the ways in which we tell the histories and stories of our field. So, rather than discuss the chapters linearly, which is not the way the book is likely intended to be read, I’ve grouped the chapters methodologically to show only one way of approaching this text.

**Chronological Histories**

Several chapters are written as thorough chronological histories. Rita Malenczyk’s chapter, “WAC’s Disappearing Act” asks, “How has WAC gotten to this point and where is it going?” The chapter traces the WAC movement from its beginnings in the 1970s through its fading as many programs adopt writing-intensive courses and the idea of “infusion of writing within a whole curriculum” (96) loses steam; she shows that although it hasn’t disappeared, WAC is quite different now than it was when originally conceived. Another chronological history includes Kathleen Blake Yancey’s chapter, “Writing Assessment in the Early Twenty-First Century,” in which she describes three waves of writing assessment and identifies themes across those waves. She begins with a historical context beginning in the 1970s and traces the role of assessment through to “the current moment” (172). Similarly, Linda Adler-Kassner and Susammarie Harrington provide a chronological history of basic writing in “Creation Myths and Flashpoints: Understanding Basic Writing Through Conflicted Stories.” They use “flash points,” or moments of conflict or change, to punctuate the narrative of basic writing. A few of the flash points they discuss include Mina Shaughnessy’s work with basic writers at CUNY, Min Zhan Lu and Mary Louise Pratt’s respective critiques of the myths of basic writing, and David Bartholomae’s interrogation of the term basic writing.

**Geographies/Mapping**

Another methodology some of the writers adopt in Exploring is the concept of mapping or geographies of areas of the field. In “Remapping Professional Writing: Articulating the State of the Art and Composition Studies,” Tim
Peeples and Bill Hart-Davidson ask “Where does professional writing fit in?” They present the “shifting geographies of professional writing” (56) through various maps showing how professional writing is related to other areas of the field. Although less literally, Heidi Estrem and E. Shelley Reid map locations of writing pedagogy education (WPE) in their chapter, “Writing Pedagogy Education: Instructor Development in Composition Studies.” They locate WPE scholarship in several different scholarly and pedagogical places, including English Education, TA training, FYC, and WAC.

**Definition Evolutions**

The writers in *Exploring Composition Studies* also provide chapters that explore the evolution of terms used in the field. One example is Christiane Donahue’s chapter, “Transfer, Portability, Generalization: (How) Does Composition Expertise ‘Carry’?,” which reviews interdisciplinary scholarship that intersects at transfer, showing how the term is used differently in different disciplines. Barbara L’Eplattenier and Lisa S. Mastrangelo’s chapter on archival research defines this particular method of research. They argue for more archival research in Composition Studies; thus, the chapter acts as a general how-to for locating archives as well as archival resources. Similarly, Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater’s chapter “‘What Goes on Here’: The Uses of Ethnography in Composition Studies” defines ethnography as pedagogy, curriculum, and research method. In his chapter, “Teaching Composition in the Multilingual World,” Paul Kei Matsuda traces the evolution of the terms used to describe students who are writing in non-native languages. And lastly, Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle challenge readers to “reimagine” how first year composition is defined in their chapter, “Reimagining the Nature of FYC: Trends in Writing-about-Writing Pedagogies.” By showing the evolution of terms in the field, these chapters all ask “What is this?, “How is this done?, “Why is this done this way?,” and “How has this changed over time?”—all important questions to consider as participants in the field.

**Methodological Examinations**

The fourth methodology used in the presentation of this research is metamethodology, of sorts. These chapters describe areas in Composition Studies in terms of how these areas have been researched. Lauren Fitzgerald’s chapter on writing center scholarship “examines examples of the three methodological approaches that undergird most writing center scholarship” (75) in order to highlight the different methodologies available to writing center researchers. Similarly, Jeanne Gunner’s chapter, “Scholarly Positions in Writing Program Administration” examines the “different orientations of WPA scholarship” (109) and looks at the roles these types of scholarship have played in molding the scholarly area of writing program administration. Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe examine multimodal
digital research as a particular context for scholarship in “Studying Literacy in Digital Contexts: Computers and Composition Studies”; they question how this type of scholarship is valued in the academy by those who evaluate tenure and promotion applications, and they look at how multimodal scholarship works in relation to traditional print research.

Each of the four methodologies described above—chronologies, maps, definitions, and meta-methodologies—asks different types of questions; the combination of these questions throughout Exploring—the whos, whys, wheres, whats, and hows—show the variety of methodologies available in conceptualizing and writing up research about composition studies. We can look to Exploring not just for the stories it tells but also for models of how to tell our stories.

Of course, when reading any collection, one must ask: What’s missing? What is left out? Only a few areas that come to mind include advanced composition, rhetorical genre studies, public writing, eco-composition, the teaching of writing online, and the burgeoning area of postcomposition. Certainly there are others, and I’m not suggesting that Ritter and Matsuda could possibly have covered them all. But, a book like this begs the questions—what is valued and included when we talk about or try to define Composition Studies as a discipline? What areas are directly under the umbrella, and what lie on the margins or are perhaps not included at all? Who gets to decide what we call Composition Studies? In the same vein, perhaps the most important moment in the book is a footnote in Peeples and Hart-Davidson’s chapter on professional writing: “‘Rhetoric and composition,’ ‘composition studies,’ ‘writing studies,’ and ‘rhetoric and writing studies’ are some of the terms used to define a field of related interests. However, these various terms reflect a range of divergent disciplinary geographies and have, in some instances, been vigorously debated and rearticulated” (53). So ultimately, what is Composition Studies? All of these are good questions to ask as participants in the field, and Exploring Composition Studies thoughtfully provokes them, both to newcomers and experienced teacher-scholars reading this book.

Because of the diversity of its contents and approaches, I can see this book on the shelves of all of us who do research in Composition Studies, as well as required reading for graduate students new to the field and those who train graduate students. It’s useful for readers who want a summary and analysis of important moments in particular areas before they go deeper into those areas for their own research. Although I would not consider myself a newcomer to the field, Exploring invigorated my thinking and re-focused my energy toward the field. The chapter on digital literacy has motivated me to consider uses of different “semiotic resources” (191) in the production and presentation of my own research. The WPE chapter has provided me with ways to think about how we will develop our university’s training for TAs in composition courses. Exploring has reminded me of an old interest I had in archival textbooks that could lead to a new research project, and it’s inspired me to try a WAW approach in my FYC class next semester. As
Andrea Lunsford says in the foreword, the book “aims to map a scholarly agenda for writing studies in the coming years” (viii). Exposure to *Exploring Composition Studies*, regardless of one's experience in the field, will certainly help any researcher at any moment in his/her career, to envision the possibilities for participation in projects that lie ahead, continuing the work that these important scholars have positioned us to do.

*Indiana, PA*

**Works Cited**


