Book Reviews


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As noted in the introduction by Lee Nickoson and Mary P. Sheridan, Writing Studies Research in Practice blurs the distinction between methodologies and methods to encompass a variety of issues and trends in writing research. The collection’s nineteen essays are divided into three parts, with part one exploring new approaches to composition research, part two examining research in the writing classroom, with particular focus on research centered on marginalized voices, and part three analyzing how knowledge is created through research. These essays explore a range of research contexts and settings, including programs and institutions, archives, community sites, and classrooms.

Themes of narrative and participant experience emerge early in the first section. The collection begins with Debra Journet’s “Narrative Turns in Writing Studies Research,” where the author examines the way that narrative influences research and creates disciplinary knowledge. Journet’s main points are that narrative inflects a range of genres and that, while personal narrative is useful, as a field we need to develop criteria for determining when it is beneficial to scholarship. Liz Rohan’s “Reseeing and Redoing: Making Historical Research at the Turn of the Millennium” also explores the value of the personal in one’s research, particularly historical archival research. Rohan argues that choosing research subjects with whom we identify does not jeopardize a realistic representation of the research subject. Her claim is consistent with that of feminist researchers, who have long argued that personal attachments to a research subject do not necessarily impede a balanced representation and may in fact enhance the quality of the research.

Later essays in part one build upon issues of narrative in writing research to explore researcher and participant interaction. Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher complicate the use of participants’ personal narratives and experiences in “Exceeding the Bounds of the Interview,” stating that devaluing participants’ experiences in research leads to possible misinterpretation and a lack of interaction with participants. Selfe and Hawisher focus particularly on the interview, noting that a feminist approach to this method implies an interactive exchange between participant and researcher. Through their study of instant messaging, Christina Haas, Pamela Takayoshi, and Brandon Carr add to the idea of interaction in their discussion of the changing nature of
composition. Symbols such as emoticons and other conventions common to text messaging, according to the authors’ findings, shape not only interactions but also the making of knowledge.

Mary P. Sheridan provides a history of ethnographic research and describes the three stages of ethnography: preresearch and submitting to IRB boards, data collection, and triangulation. Sheridan points out that while these stages may seem tidy, they involve many negotiations amongst researcher, participant, and institutional systems. To assist in this negotiation, Sheridan calls for the inclusion of multiple voices to better understand the social factors at play. Issues in ethnography are also explored by A. Suresh Canagarajah in his piece “Autoethnography in the Study of Multilingual Writers,” where he describes a method of self-study useful for analyzing language difference. The method, which entails observation of one’s own writing practices, values the unique experience of transnational writing.

Passion and attachment to research are reoccurring themes throughout the collection and serve as a call to action for researchers. From a technofeminist perspective, Kristine L. Blair writes about personal attachments to research and its potential for social change. She emphasizes the need to put research into practice and cites her technology summer camp for preteen girls, Digital Mirror Computer Camp, as an example. This camp calls attention to the disparities in technology use amongst gender groups and offers positive change within the community. These passions and attachments shape not only the knowledge we produce but also the information we internalize, as Kristie Fleckenstein points out in her essay, “Reclaiming the Mind: Eco-Cognitive Research in Writing Studies.” Fleckenstein uses an eco-cognitive model to discuss research and learning as a type of ecology, citing the online classroom as an example of how individuals process shared knowledge: “what becomes information is that which is important for the individual at that moment” (91). Knowledge is constructed through our own personal lenses; researchers should consider issues of cognition when designing research projects.

Part two is more directly focused on one’s position as a researcher, with Lee Nickoson beginning the section with an examination of what constitutes teacher-research. The once-accepted definition of a teacher studying one’s own classroom has broadened to include any educator conducting research to benefit the profession. The idea that research can directly benefit a community is also explored by Jeffrey T. Grabill in “Community-Based Research and the Importance of a Research Stance,” which explores the idea of a research stance. Grabill notes that his own stance as a community-based researcher originates in his valuing the experiences of community member participants as well as the method’s potential for social change.
Like Blair and Grabill, Asao B. Inoue calls attention to social issues in writing research, exploring race as a factor in writing assessment in his essay, “Racial Methodologies for Composition Studies.” Since quantitative and qualitative studies have shown that students of color are more likely to receive lower writing assessment scores, Inoue calls for information on racial identity to be tracked along with assessment outcomes in order to more fairly design assessments and ensure validity and reliability. Similarly, Karen J. Lunsford calls for greater attention to international writing in composition research, pointing to the uniquely American first-year writing course compared to more specialized writing in international university settings.

Douglas Hesse explores writing research done at the program level, noting its varying purposes and audiences for both writing program administrators and graduate students. Steve Lamos adds to the conversation about program-level research in his essay “Institutional Critique in Composition Studies: Methodological and Ethical Considerations for Researchers.” Lamos describes the value of digging for hidden gems in institutional research and the ethical concerns of whether to name human subjects when engaging in this type of study. Jenn Fishman builds upon these ideas as she discusses the importance of longitudinal program studies for the field, citing her experience with the valuable Stanford Study of Writing. The consensus in these essays is that program research offers benefits but also poses risks.

Part three begins with a debate about the role of quantitative versus qualitative research. Richard H. Haswell’s “Quantitative Methods in Composition Studies” revisits the importance of quantitative research in composition studies. He cites the example of the WPA-L, where users regularly query the list for statistical data regarding first-year writing. Haswell points out that the information users are seeking often does not exist. He uses Mina Shaughnessy’s suggestion of “diving in” to urge scholars to carefully attend to statistical analysis and also to analyze the research methods of others.

In close conversation with Haswell is Bob Broad’s contribution, “Strategies and Passions in Empirical Research.” Like many of the authors in this collection, Broad revisits the importance of acknowledging one’s passions and attachments to research, including not only the research subject but also the research methods. Broad notes that research is messy and difficult to neatly define. He points out that, while Johanek begins her canonical book Composing Research with a call for unbiased research methods, such methods are nonexistent, and he points out that Johanek’s personal attachments were her reason for writing the book.

Writing Studies also touches on the opportunities and challenges for Internet researchers. In their piece, “The Role of Activity Analysis in Writing Research,” Mike Palmquist, Joan Mullin, and Glenn Blalock discuss three
books—WAC Clearinghouse, CompPile, and the Research Exchange Index or REx—to discuss the activity systems at play not only in the creation of these sites but also within composition studies. The Internet also provides new ethical concerns for researchers, as Heidi A. McKee and James E. Porter address in their chapter, “The Ethics of Conducting Writing Research on the Internet.” The authors look at issues of public versus private writing and how resulting tensions affect ethical research practices. For example, when IRBs review a writing-related research project, a key factor in determining whether the project requires approval (and whether the writing being studied is private or public) is the level of interaction between researcher and participant. To better address the murky ethical issues of online data collection, the authors stress the need to be transparent about one’s position as a researcher regardless of whether a project requires review.

Writing Studies Research and Practice does not detail the basic workings of surveys, interviews, and coding, but instead considers why it is we do the research that we do and why this question matters. Both novice and experienced writing researchers would find material to benefit their research practices in this collection. The book reveals emerging trends in the field while building on current conversations and traditions.

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