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Encouraging and Supporting Teacher Research in the US and UK

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Abstract

Given the diversity of types of writing instructors in US and UK tertiary education and the range of their scholarly backgrounds, the likelihood is that most instructors have not participated in research in composition theory or pedagogy, rhetoric, academic literacies, or writing studies. The four projects reported here highlight the research opportunities and capacities of this diverse group, reflecting different types and levels of teacher or practitioner inquiry that involves teachers in studying significant questions arising from their own contexts. The article offers a brief history of practitioner inquiry research in its various forms and traditions; presents the projects themselves, including their aims and framing; and offers specific recommendations for the future of this invaluable form of inquiry.

Definitions of action research vary greatly. The term in its broadest sense refers to research conducted in a field setting with those actually involved in that field, often along with an 'outsider', into the study of questions influenced by practitioners, rather than solely by 'experts' (Noffke 1996: 2).

At the end of the day as teachers, we are often left wondering: Are we doing enough? How do we know? These are the essential questions that occupy the hearts and minds of so many of us as we walk into our classrooms (Goswami, Lewis and Rutherford 2009: 2).

Teacher research just isn't like other forms of research, in part because there is no blueprint for how to do it (Goswami, Lewis and Rutherford 2009: 1).

The Setting

Although much public attention is given to whether university students develop strong writing competences at university, the fact remains that much of the introduction and socialization into tertiary-level writing is done by non-permanent, or non-tenure track faculty, either part- or full-time. In the US and the UK, this is either through direct instruction, or through support by academic staff in writing centres and WAC/WID¹ programs (Russell 2003: vii). This arguably less secure cohort of faculty is likely to have academic training in literature, creative writing, teaching English as a Foreign Language, linguistics, or any number of related fields, but *not* much scholarly expertise in composition

¹ WAC refers to Writing Across the Curriculum; WID refers to Writing in the Disciplines.

theory and pedagogy, rhetoric, academic literacies, or writing studies.

At most US universities, tenured or tenure track English Department faculty members do not teach the majority of the introductory composition courses in which most students are required to enroll; much of the teaching is conducted by graduate students and part-time faculty. The latest figures from the Modern Language Association, the American professional organization that represents English departments, states that in 'four-year institutions, faculty members working off the tenure track, whether full- or part-time, make up about 60% of all faculty members in English. In two-year colleges, the figure rises to approach 80% for English' (Feal 2010). While there are independent writing programs in the US, most writing courses are delivered through English departments. Introductory courses on academic writing, which are a common feature of US curricula, are especially likely to be taught by graduate students or non-permanent, adjunct faculty. In the UK and on the European continent, a large percentage of the staff assigned to teaching writing in writing centres or freestanding academic units are also marginalized, partially because they have no disciplinary 'home', and partly because there are too few of them to deal with this serious educational challenge.

At Fairfield University in Connecticut, for example, where one of the authors of this article directs the Core Writing Program, fully 75% of our 45 sections of the first year writing sequence are delivered by part-time teaching faculty whose contracts have to be renewed each year. At Dartmouth, the 50 sections of introductory writing are taught largely by adjuncts, while the first-year seminar courses are taught by tenure-track faculty. At Coventry University's Centre for Academic Writing in the UK, one-to-one tutorials and workshops are taught by tutors on permanent but fractional contracts, whilst staff development work is undertaken by lecturers on full-time permanent contracts. Overall, contingent faculty (with the possible exception of the tutors) often face uncertain status, lack of access to many resources and rewards of higher education, including support and recognition for traditional forms of research and publication, and low pay. These programmatic conditions militate against serious commitment to professional and programmatic development, even though the academic literacy teaching these faculty and staff do is central to the educational success of all students.

How then can those in charge of these units create not only more effective and knowledgeable teachers, but also more productive teaching-learning approaches across a whole program or centre? Similarly, how can these marginalized groups increase their professional participation in the field of writing studies? Is it possible to find better ways to support the large number of part-time and non-tenure-track full-time faculty to increase their engagement and exercise greater agency, not only to improve their pedagogical performance, but also the work of program development itself?

A typical response to ensure program quality and consistency is simply to organize the whole curriculum from the top down, or as Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1993) refer to it, 'outside in'. In this scenario, Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) or small executive committees choose the texts to be taught, and/or create a single syllabus for everyone to teach from. In the case of writing centres, administrators set out specific, scripted protocols for tutorials or workshops. However, this course of action can make for a rigid and less responsive program, as well as attenuating the agency of the writing professionals who enact it. A common response to such programmatic ossification is to see the issue as simply one of 'faculty development' and to subject adjunct instructors to staff meetings and workshops, or other training encounters to acquaint them with 'the best thinking' in the field.

Interestingly, there have also been increasing calls in the field for more and better research² to support, test, challenge and confirm our notions of the 'best practices' of teaching writing at tertiary level. Chris Anson, a leading US WPA, notes that there is 'ample evidence that the field of composition has recently lessened its attention to research' (2009: 21), and he argues:

[I]f we continue to rely on *belief* in our pedagogies and administrative decisions, whether theorized or not, whether argued from logic or anecdote, experience or conviction, we do no better to support a case for those decisions than what most detractors do to support cases

² While research is itself not a term with a universally accepted meaning, for the purpose of this paper it is systematic inquiry to generate interpretable data in response to a research question.

against them. Instead, we need a more robust plan for building on the strong base of existing research into our assumptions about how students best learn to write (2009: 11-12).

U.S. writing scholar Rich Haswell has argued, in parallel, for more research that is Replicable, Aggregable, and Data supported, or 'RAD' (2005: 200), while Anson suggests that a:

[R]e-expansion and renewed acceptance of all forms of research, especially quantitative, is still needed for us to pursue questions relevant to WPAs and their stewardship of successful writing programs, questions focusing especially on the nature of learning and the most supportable instructional methods and approaches (2009: 23).

Whilst not all studies fit the 'RAD' category, Anson's invitation to 'all forms of research' promises at least some real place for a variety of approaches in the larger research discourse, including the one we will develop here, practitioner research. The call for evidence-based research to undergird curricular and pedagogical practice on the teaching of writing is not restricted to the US; indeed, it is an international topic of concern.

Whilst 'best practice' approaches can be useful as examples, we believe that such a strategy does not acknowledge the real competence and potential agency of writing instructors or consultants as scholars who are members of a professional faculty community, and who can generate a dynamic and effective writing program. Nor does it add to the research infrastructure of the field. Ann Berthoff refers to it as just 'recipe swapping' (1987: 32). Our solution, therefore, is to encourage writing instructors to conduct their own practitioner research based on their own questions and concerns in order to build more vital programs. There is a long tradition of such research in the secondary schools (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993 and 2009); we argue that it is underutilized by university writing programs and writing instructors, both in America and in other national settings. Employed properly, it could go some distance towards revitalizing the teaching of writing at the tertiary level and professionalizing those who teach it.

Although the authors' situations and perspectives on practitioner research are distinctive, they all subscribe to the notion that encouraging (and partnering with) teaching and academic support staff to undertake research projects in their own classroom or pedagogical situations, and to collaborate with each other to do program-wide research, will not only enable them to become more effective instructors; it can also help to build more coherent, intentional, and responsive programs. In the long run, we argue, this kind of rich, layered researching orientation can also add to the profession's evolving understanding of writing and literacy development.

This paper offers examples from four different institutional situations in which writing faculty are encouraged to try active forms of applied or pedagogic research. John Brereton and Cinthia Gannett provide some background on the development of pedagogic, action, or practitioner research, explaining some of its strengths, and summarizing some obstacles preventing its widespread adoption in college writing programs. They also share some of the ways they have sponsored action research projects at their respective institutions. Tiane Donahue then describes the new emphasis on research she has begun to institute at her university, Dartmouth College, where about a third of the writing instruction is carried out by affiliate faculty. Finally, Mary Deane recounts her program's efforts to institute teacher research at Coventry University's Centre for Academic Writing, where research is a central part of the Centre's mission (Deane and Ganobcsik-Williams 2011).

Origins and Definitions

(John Brereton and Cinthia Gannett)

Action research or practitioner research is not a single type or method of research: as many have noted, it is better characterized as a movement or as a stance towards inquiry, drawing on many different models and sources and composed of many kinds of projects. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009: 5-59) offer a rich and useful overview of the current state of practitioner inquiry. They identify several categories and genres of practitioner inquiry: action research/participatory action research, teacher research, self-study, and the scholarship of teaching (2009: 39) and they offer a nuanced discussion of their similarities and differences. For our purposes, we use practitioner inquiry, teacher

research, and action research interchangeably as umbrella terms, though we note how the multiplicity and complexity of terms has consequences for the visibility of such inquiry projects. We understand that the term 'research' is particularly contested, so we want to think of 'inquiry' as the broadest concept that governs our discussion.

The types of teacher or practitioner research/inquiry we are advocating here are often considered to be outgrowths of the action research movement in the US and the UK starting in the middle decades of the twentieth century, though there are multiple possible sources and early figures. The term 'action research' was first used around 1944 by Kurt Lewin (1890–1947), a German émigré and social psychologist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who developed sensitivity training. It fits well into a stream of teacher empowerment work associated with John Dewey in the 1930s, who urged teachers to conduct reflective inquiry-based research in their classrooms throughout his career. Another commonly-cited source is John Collier, the United States Commissioner for Indian Affairs from 1933–45, who used the term 'action research' to describe a research/action/reflection process whereby Indians could enhance their farming practices and thus improve their economic situation.

From its beginnings, action research was seen as an effort to conduct research from the bottom up. Educational action research aims for improved or enhanced learning in specific situations (practical action research) and/or can also work towards broader social justice aims: to challenge and change restrictive educational sites, practices, and organizations to render them more democratic, participatory, and life-enhancing (critical action research) (Mills 2007: 6–7). Action research does not have to be elaborate; it is prompted by real questions that arise in local educational settings, and is conducted by the practitioners themselves, sometimes with university researchers as partners, often collaboratively with colleagues or students. Researchers can use any number of methods that are appropriate for that situation, and are primarily concerned with turning findings into results, into action. Action research should be informed by current theory and relevant literature, and the findings should be used and, where possible, disseminated through presentation/sharing at the program level, or through reports, websites, or other more formal publication venues. Action research is often recursive, moving repeatedly from action to research and reflection, and back to action.

Action research caught on early in many social scientific and educational settings, and crossed the Atlantic to influence an important strand of British teacher education, notably work by Lawrence Stenhouse at the Schools Council's Humanities Curriculum Project in the 1960s and later at the Ford Teaching Project (1973–76) with the work of John Elliott (1991), Clement Adelman (1993) and Donald Schon (1987). Kemmis and McTaggart (1990) described action research this way:

It essentially involves practitioners examining their own practice, for very concrete reasons. It can be compared with experimental research, which is much more formal, much more basic. Action research is primarily concerned with practice, and is conducted by the practitioners themselves (1990: 5).

Over time, practitioner inquiry/action research has crossed and recrossed international boundaries, regularly re-fertilizing traditions in the US, the UK, Australia and elsewhere. One major center of action research activity has developed in Australia, with work by Carr, Kemmis, McTaggart, and others whose practitioner research has been taken up in many countries and in many fields over the past three decades. Another interesting example of action research is the French IDEAS, a site where action research issues are discussed by scholars.³ Lately some progress has been made on adopting action research in university settings; for instance, Lindblom-Yänne (2006) reports on action research work at Finnish universities.

Educational action research has remained an active tradition in the United States (much of it with international reach), with its own journals, a special section at the American Educational Research Association, the Penn Conference on Ethnography, the Carnegie Foundation's CASTL project (Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning), the enthusiastic support of the National Writing Project, National Council of Teachers of English, and continued development through the Bread Loaf Teacher Network. There are also several book series, such as the Columbia

³ For a more thorough discussion of the international status of action research projects, see Atweh, Kemmis, and Weeks (1998), Hollingsworth (1997), McTaggart (1997).

Teacher's College Press Teacher Inquiry Series, which includes over 30 titles, and the NCRL Language and Literacy Series (see Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) and Goswami, Lewis and Rutherford (2009) for a full description of the many kinds of international projects, publications, and networks).

Challenges to University Action Research in Writing Studies

Practitioner inquiry and action research was promoted in part as a response to the traditional positivistic research paradigms of the twentieth century. Indeed, action research was strongly opposed by the traditional education research establishment in the US, as too much 'action' and not enough 'research' – in fact, as not being 'research' at all, defined as conducted from outside a site by 'experts', context-free, methodologically pure, objective, and generalizable (Hodgkinson 1957). Hodgkinson later went on to head America's National Institute of Education, which endorsed only the strictest forms of social scientific research.

In a well-known critique from the 1980s, Ann E. Berthoff argued strongly that traditional research paradigms did not address the domain of education very well:

The notion that 'research' can provide directions is absurd – I mean the kind of research supported, for instance, by the National Institute on Education. The institute guidelines explicitly state that NIE has no interest whatsoever in practical application: no proposals for curriculum, course design, or sequences of assignments will be entertained; attempts to define implications for the classroom are unwelcome (1987: 29).

Within the field there has been considerable variability in the status of action research as well. North's influential *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* dismissed teacher research as 'lore' (1985). Recently, Bazerman's (2008) *Handbook of Writing Research* claimed to cover all types of research, but it simply omitted teacher research (or any of the other names it can go by: action research, teacher inquiry, pedagogic research). Similarly, the terms 'action research' and 'teacher research' are missing altogether in the *Bedford Bibliography for Teachers of Writing* (Reynolds, Bizzell and Herzberg 2003). Another recent US-based overview of writing research, Smagorinsky's (2006) *Research on Composition*, does devote a chapter to teacher research and notes that it occurs at many levels of education, but focuses exclusively on the secondary level.

Even though much current composition research is avowedly situated, perhaps part of the problem action research has faced stems from the fact that one major strand of it is determinedly local, often defined as dealing with one teacher's investigation of a single classroom, thereby flying under the radar of publication. *College Composition and Communication*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, and *College English*, the leading US composition journals, do not regularly publish articles dealing with applied pedagogic research. While formal publication is not a necessary feature of teacher research, the very fact that it is not always written for publication means it often remains local, undiscovered, and thus is destined to be less visible in professional bibliographies. Interestingly, this situation may change as English faculty in the US and Europe face severely restricted publication opportunities (particularly with the collapse of academic book publishing) and will have to publish their research online.

Terminological diffusion

Action research started out as one of the preferred terms for such applied forms of inquiry (though there have always been several in circulation). However, over the past few decades, the terms have morphed and multiplied, to include, 'teacher research,' 'participatory action research,' 'practitioner research/inquiry,' 'teacher inquiry,' 'classroom research,' or, more recently, a larger, more inclusive term, 'the scholarship of teaching and learning' (SoTL) which covers action research but includes other research as well. It is easy to lose track with all the different overlapping names. Different scholars have constructed different taxonomies of these terms and discern different distinctions among them. The lack of a stable nomenclature is an indication of action research's somewhat complex trajectory and variable visibility among college and university scholars/teachers and administrators/managers.

Focus on K-12 settings

In literacy studies and academic writing, action research is thriving at the secondary level, but it has only been employed sporadically at the university or tertiary level. In the US during the 1970s and 1980s action/teacher research in writing and literacy studies experienced a strong surge of interest, and laid a foundation for a rich set of action research sites, projects and publications. At the college level, Goswami and Stillman's *Reclaiming the Classroom: Teacher Research as an Agency for Change* (1987) is considered a foundational collection for literacy studies at this time. In it, most of the major figures in the writing process movement of the 1970s and 1980s (many connected to or sponsored by the Bread Loaf School) are represented, including researchers from the US, the UK, and Australia (Garth Boomer, James Britton, Nancy Martin, Anne Berthoff, Shirley Brice Heath, Don Graves, Ken Macrorie, Janet Emig, Mina Shaughnessy, Lee Odell, and Nancie Atwell). Most of these projects, though, connected university researchers with K-12 partners, or featured K-12 action researchers, rather than enacting action research at the university level itself, with some exceptions, such as joined Education and Rhetoric/Compositions programs at the University of New Hampshire from the 1970s through the 1990s, which also produced several university-based action researchers. In fact, it was only in Great Britain and Australia that action research, or teacher inquiry, or applied pedagogic research had some success catching on in post-secondary settings, though again, not with any striking focus on writing pedagogy.

Ethics Issues

Activist agenda

Action Research was critiqued from time to time in the 1970s and 1980s as being too closely tied to leftist notions of teacher empowerment, particularly in the UK. Some of the publications from those years connect action research to an activist social and political agenda, thereby scaring off many administrators. (Of course, others have argued that some strands of action research had lost their essential activist character).

Ethics Policy Boards and Institutional Research Boards

An impediment to the adoption of action research lies in the fact that college teachers are increasingly constrained by Institutional Research Boards (IRBs), which in the US are set up to approve faculty research. Such Ethics Policy Boards do not exist in all countries, but they are increasingly common. They are controlled by traditional researchers who are often hostile to teacher inquiry projects, even though curriculum research that does not get published is often exempt from oversight. Well-known composition scholars Andrea Lunsford and Karen Lunsford in a recent CCC article recount the thorny problems they faced from IRBs when they attempted to collect data from beyond their own campuses (Lunsford and Lunsford 2008: 787). Other researchers may be wary of attempting similar work.

Action Research in Institutional Settings

We now turn to look at the implementations of action research we know best, those we ourselves have instituted in different settings.

John Brereton

The Calderwood Writing Initiative at the Boston Athenaeum

As Director of the Calderwood Writing Initiative at the Boston Athenaeum, a library and cultural center, John Brereton sponsored a multi-year collaboration with the Snowden School, a Boston public high school. One of the key parts of this collaboration was providing the means and opportunity for the teachers to conduct their own action research projects. All the teachers participated in a year-long pedagogical seminar, where they designed their projects and then reported their results. At the end of the year the Calderwood Initiative subsidized the printing of the teachers' reports in a book that was distributed to the Boston public schools. When the teachers were polled about the experience, they were enthusiastic about conducting research and unanimously agreed that the experience had made

them better teachers. They especially appreciated the opportunity to work on their projects in a seminar setting and compare their results with fellow faculty members.

Brereton also shaped and funded an action research project at the University of Maine at Farmington called the Calderwood Conversations, in which high school and college writing teachers from all over the state of Maine met together to discuss the state of student writing. These informal gatherings produced a great deal of enlightenment on both sides, going a long way to explain the difficulties each level faced in writing instruction. The conversations were recorded and will be printed in the near future as a model of this type of research for other American states to follow.

Calderwood also funded the first American study of community college writers, with a grant to Howard Tinberg and J.D. Nadeau, at Bristol Community College in Massachusetts. Together they conducted the action research that led to the book-length study *The Community College Writer* (2010), the first book-length study of writers in this important segment of higher education.

Cynthia Gannett

Fairfield University: Action Research and Professional, Curricular and Program Development

Fairfield University is a small (5,500 students), selective liberal arts university in Fairfield, Connecticut. A Jesuit college, Fairfield has a very strong traditional core curriculum with a two-semester required introductory writing and reading sequence (English 11 and 12) offered through its English department. There is also a third required literature core course. Senior faculty in the English Department regularly teach in the composition and literature sequence, but over time, growth in the curriculum and major has resulted in 75% or more of the core writing sections being staffed by affiliate/adjunct faculty, who teach one or two sections a semester. Most of the adjunct faculty have master's degrees in English, and several have terminal degrees in Literature/Literary Studies or Creative Writing. Most do not read in, or participate in, the current scholarly conversations in the field of writing studies, and there has been little expectation that they do so. Indeed, many disciplinary faculty 'remain largely unaware of – and sometimes resistant to – applying pedagogical research to their teaching practices' (Cross and Steadman 1996: 5). Several affiliate faculty have taught in the department for over 15 years and a few have taught up to 30 years, working hard to make their courses effective, but they remain isolated from the supportive professional research-based discourse in the field or ongoing conversation in the department that might have encouraged regular innovation and renewal.

The 'program' has had some faculty coordination in terms of the pragmatics of course staffing over the years, but no serious programmatic development. As a result, the courses have become remarkably diverse in content and approach, held together tenuously by a common name, a few tacit expectations, and one required library presentation. As the founding 'Director of Core Writing' in 2008, brought in, in large part, to help re-vitalize and professionalize the program and the staff, Gannett's fundamental action-research project has been to re-imagine the curriculum and the program from this loosely constellated set of courses and course sections, and to create a community of practice and a culture of inquiry from the diverse set of faculty who teach the course.

As an administrator/teacher/scholar charged with program development, she could have gone with what might be termed a 'best practices' model, reorganizing the whole program from an 'expert' sense of the most productive theoretical and practical approaches to teaching composition. Certainly some would have welcomed it if she had just offered new course guidelines, selected all the course textbooks, and presented staff workshops on peer review, assignment design, effective evaluation rubrics and portfolios, integrating technology, etc. But as a life-long action researcher that seemed insufficient, so she decided to call on participatory and collaborative action research as a central mode for inquiry and transformation. From her first letters of introduction to the staff, she explained that they would create the next incarnation of the program through a collaborative, iterative form of practitioner inquiry. Here is a sampling of the ways in which they have proceeded:

1) Taking stock and remaking the curriculum: investigating the current shapes and forms of the courses and approaches in order to build a new curriculum plan

In order to understand the myriad versions of the sequence which collectively constitute the program as it is currently enacted, two of the adjunct faculty and Gannett created a matrix and analyzed all the course syllabi to identify similarities and the range of differences in aims, approaches, topics, assignments, and classroom activities. This project was critical for several reasons: a) faculty were able to start seeing their courses as part of a program, b) the analyses were used as a critical source of information for a one-week institute on curricular reform across the department in the summer of 2009, and c) the snapshot of courses will serve as benchmark for comparison in terms of curricular coherence in the next version of the program. Those syllabi analyses were used along with comparative data on course sequences from the other 27 Jesuit institutions and current approaches and practices from current professional organizations. Intensive participatory work with full and adjunct faculty across the next several months resulted in a whole new set of course aims, descriptions, and signature practices which began in the Fall of 2010.

2) Building a community of practice and a culture of inquiry

a)

It was clear that faculty had their own questions about the program, not just about the curriculum or the assignments, though those are important, but also about teaching practices and the material conditions of their work. Therefore, they invited questions from all of the adjunct faculty members, and one of the long-term adjunct faculty members took the lead in creating a survey that would address those programmatic questions. She conducted the survey in 2009 and reported on these critical action research findings both to the program faculty and to the Department. Some of those findings became part of the formal program report to the Dean and the Vice President for Academic Affairs.

b)

As the staff begin to offer the new curriculum, they will support a variety of specific action-research projects to gather initial information about the features and efficacy of the new program. Small grants and support monies will be available to support the following:

- Six sections of the Core Writing course have volunteered to participate in an e-portfolio pilot project to use electronic portfolios and document their experiences over the first semester. They will report back to the full staff regularly. They may decide to write their work up as a more formal research project and/or create resources for the rest of the faculty who will be working toward e-portfolios over the next few years.
- The Core Writing faculty are identifying other areas for research connected to the new program for next year. Some of the topics generated so far include: integrating and scaffolding inquiry projects across the whole semester, sponsoring undergraduate research in the Core Writing courses, using reflective writing to create meta-learners, researching different ways to sponsor more effective peer review/peer writing workshops, experimenting with ways to partner more effectively with the library to teach information and research literacies.
- Observation Partnerships: the program will provide stipends to pairs of faculty who want to observe each other's classrooms at least three times across the semester, write up their observations, and discuss them with each other regularly. These opportunities for observation are intended not only to share information about teaching performance, and to build community, but also to develop classroom observation skills as part of an action research culture. They also expect these encounters to prompt additional research questions to share with all program faculty.
- They are also exploring program-wide efforts to gather data on students' models of writing and sense of writing efficacy as they arrive so they can begin to look at questions of the conflict of expectations between students and teachers.

Generating these projects together has begun to lead the affiliate faculty to the larger research literature which enables them to conduct these projects thoughtfully, and they are engaging

increasingly with the scholarly pedagogical literature as well as creating new community identities as scholar-practitioners who can shape their programs rather than just enact programs that others organize.

Tiane Donahue

Dartmouth Institute for Writing and Rhetoric, Dartmouth College, US

A US colleague, reflecting on a curricular innovation gone wrong and how the group could have proceeded differently, said recently in a draft article she is preparing, 'my experience demonstrates once again the importance of informing compositionists' work with theory' (Dean, draft in progress). This view on theory is one she and Donahue have discussed over the years, but arguably it does not go far enough. Active involvement in interacting with theory through research is the deeper need, and programs can be developed through fostering research activity.

The Dartmouth Institute for Writing and Rhetoric, USA, is a stand-alone unit that coordinates introductory writing courses required of all Dartmouth students, upper-level disciplinary writing courses, speech courses, and faculty development. The writing courses include both US-style first-year composition courses labeled 'first-year seminar' which introduce students to research (in the sense of reading the scholarship about a topic) and writing in a more discipline-related way, although they are not courses 'in the discipline.' The first-year composition courses are taught almost entirely by adjunct faculty, and the first-year seminars almost entirely by tenure-track faculty.

While the programming has been in place for decades, the stand-alone status is recent (2005) and has provided an opportunity for new directions. Core to these new directions is the introduction of support for research by faculty, mostly adjuncts who are experienced teachers of writing dedicated to effective pedagogy but who have not been encouraged or given incentives to maintain an active research agenda, for a variety of US-specific institutional reasons mentioned in the introduction, including adjuncts' status, lack of time, and, often, a higher teaching load than tenure-track faculty. In addition, composition itself in the US – writing studies – has historically been marginalized, as has its research.⁴

Donahue has targeted, in much of her own work, support for research as essential to developing excellent teachers, to developing evidence-based programs, and to helping a discipline evolve in strength, legitimacy, and insight while maintaining unique contributions to scientific knowledge. The kind of research she has intentionally focused on at Dartmouth falls into a broader category of 'inquiry' as an activity that can take many forms, each with its own complicated history, set of drawbacks and strengths, users, ideologies, institutional currency, and intentions. Within this broader category, she has argued that assessment might be at one end of a continuum of inquiry, the pragmatic-applied end, with objectives tied to improvement and discrete measurable features, and 'pure' research might be at the other end of this spectrum, in the traditional social-sciences sense of the term. At the risk of oversimplifying, this form of inquiry emphasizes knowledge for knowledge's sake, and envisions each individual research study as contributing to a body of knowledge that cumulatively creates a source for improving practice. Assessment has unfortunately become associated with external pressures and accountability, while traditional research has developed a complicated two-way problematic relationship with composition studies, simultaneously rejected by many in composition and the source of rejection of composition's tendency towards ethnography, qualitative research, self-report, and other methods. The continuum is of course not nearly this simple, but complicated by other factors: the quality of any type of work on the continuum (rather than locating quality *a priori* in a particular type or approach), the purpose for a particular project, the discipline evaluating this quality, the shared or differentiated tools used, and so on.

In this frame, Donahue is working to shift the possibilities for research at Dartmouth's Institute, to integrate research as a core feature of our writing program. The forms of research Donahue has

⁴ This has been the case for too broad a variety of reasons to treat here, but some include: writing being seen as a 'skill' only or as remedial, as content-less and not worthy of disciplinary weight, as not supported by research, and so on.

proposed to faculty at Dartmouth are not quite practitioner research, as explored by other contributions in this article, in that faculty may be exploring questions arising out of their practice, but the research object is not specifically a faculty member's class. It fits, however, into the broader forms of inquiry treated here, as grounded in real faculty observations and designed to work in both quantitative and qualitative ways. Beginning with the necessary precursor to research, the literature review, Dartmouth writing research leaders asked faculty: 'What do you want to know about writing, teaching writing, and learning to write?' This resulted in 20 great questions, from which adjunct faculty at the Institute have begun defining points of inquiry and exploring available literature, individually or in small groups:

- Electronic literacies and the impact on academic writing; how does digital composition work to develop different forms of thinking?
- What kinds of feedback from faculty are most useful to students' progress as writers, speakers and thinkers?
- Using discourse analysis to study students' introduction-writing, what can we learn?
- What connections might exist between fear of public speaking and writer's block?

For a period of a few months, Donahue offered mini-grants to faculty interested in pursuing these questions. Three of the groups focused on a review of the literature; a fourth effected preliminary actual analysis, learning how to do discourse analysis of short selections and working together on ten introductory paragraphs from students' end-of-term research papers. The mini-grants were thus a starting point for the research that will follow, including elaborating proposed projects and methods.

The next phase of this work is ongoing. The Institute was awarded a Davis Educational Foundation grant in 2009 to pursue more extensive research, focused on program-wide understanding of what students are producing and what they are transferring from course to course in their first year writing sequence. The project will connect the preliminary literature review of the mini-grants to a comprehensive literature review and a study of a random sample of students' writing taken from all first-year students; faculty volunteers are receiving honoraria in recognition of their participation. The project will be completed in 2012. It will likely raise more questions than it answers, but the faculty are from across the first-year courses, and it is hoped that they will find the work exciting and insightful enough to pursue individual inquiries.

The direct and indirect impacts on faculty development, teaching, and general Institute identity were not always or immediately positive. They have included, so far, and keeping in mind that they have done primarily literature review work: recognizing insufficient resources (the material problems of supporting this work and offering the right kinds of space); concern about making faculty feel pressured to do more than is in their job description; lack of faculty preparation for research in these new domains, although faculty are often well-versed in research in the field (often literary) of their degrees; finally, the fact that some teachers are in the field of teaching writing precisely because they have chosen to pursue a path that does not include research.

How, then, is all of this conducive to programmatic evolution? It seeds research, seeds a research-driven, evidence-based composition program; it can create a community of inquiry, methods, results, shared developing knowledge; it supports collaboration amongst faculty that pushes to meta-inquiry; it can encourage shifts in thinking. If individuals do engage in data collection at a later stage, it can create a body of teachers actively sharing students' struggles as they themselves grapple with inquiry and writing. It will help teachers to understand that research creates a body of knowledge from which to draw, not a single study that gets 'applied'. This allows for extraordinary freedom: one project doesn't do it all, and doesn't need to. It facilitates the contextualization of program-wide assessment in far stronger ways. And finally, for teacher researchers at the Institute, it helps to change perceptions of the Institute and of writing among other faculty across the disciplines.

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The British Context

In Britain there is no comparable tradition of the first year general writing classes prevalent in the US, and without Composition and Rhetoric courses writing instruction takes place in a variety of different institutional locations (Russell 2003). This arguably complicates the possibility of conducting research because the British community of writing instructors is dispersed across a wide range of university spaces, including academic departments, libraries, writing centres, learning development units, staff development centres, and study skills units.

Similar to the US context, many writing teachers at the tertiary level are not employed on a permanent basis or required to undertake research as part of their job remits (Wingate 2006). These conditions can make research into teaching writing in the UK relatively complex, as can the diversity of traditions informing pedagogic approaches. Some British writing instructors have a background in teaching English as a foreign language, others have training in literary studies or linguistics, and others in technical or professional writing. As in the US, tertiary level writing teachers are not necessarily trained in educational research methods, and when this is compounded with limited expectations of research activity from senior managers inquiry into teaching writing can be under-prioritised. It is recognized that pedagogic research can enhance students' experiences of tertiary level study and that scholarship can raise institutional profiles but the potential for inquiry into teaching writing is not necessarily appreciated, perhaps especially as the practice of teaching writing is so diverse.

Coventry University is located in the Midlands region of England, which is traditionally a centre of manufacturing and the home of the British car industry (Cheesewright 2009). Whilst this industrial heritage has declined in recent years, the area has undergone substantial regeneration, true to the myth of the phoenix rising which is the city and the University's symbol:



Figure 1. Coventry University's logo.

The Coventry College of Design was established in 1843 and was re-named the Coventry school of Art in 1852. This institution joined with the Lanchester College of Technology and Rugby College of Engineering Technology in 1970 to become the Lanchester Polytechnic, which was re-named Coventry Polytechnic in 1987 and became Coventry University in 1992 when many former polytechnics were given university status in the UK (Cheesewright 2009). Coventry University continues this orientation towards professional studies, specialising in Art and Design, Engineering, and Technology, and Health Studies.

The Centre for Academic Writing at Coventry University was founded in 2004 under the aegis of the staff development unit, and following an internal restructuring process in 2009 it became affiliated with the Library. The Centre was the first unit of its kind in the UK with a three-fold remit for:

- Staff development in writing pedagogies and publication
- Student writing development
- Research into writing development

This three-fold mission makes the Centre for Academic Writing a pivotal player in the UK-based debate about who constructs knowledge about, for, and from writing classrooms, especially as a variety of professionals work to fulfill these three goals. The related agendas of staff development, student teaching, and research are pursued within a two-tier team of staff members at the Centre. A team of three lecturers offer colleagues across the university staff development in writing theory and

practice, and the lecturers teach undergraduate writing courses. All the lecturers have PhDs and some started out working as writing tutors at the Centre. A team of ten part-time Academic Writing Tutors provide one-to-one tutorials and workshops to undergraduate and postgraduate students, and they develop resources. The tutors' qualifications vary; some hold PhDs, others have master's degrees, and others are qualified to teach English as a Foreign Language or the International Baccalaureate. Every tutor brings a specialisation to the Centre and makes suggestions to develop the activities and aims of the whole team, for instance at the monthly team meetings.

Research into the outcomes of individualised writing tuition

The majority of the writing tutors' time is allocated to teaching students one-to-one; yet personalised teaching interventions are resource intensive, so one of the Centre's key challenges is to demonstrate the outcomes of one-to-one writing tutorials in a cost-conscious educational climate. Dr. Erik Borg led a study that aimed to identify the outcomes of writing tutorials. This involved collecting students' draft assignments before they attended tutorials, and comparing these with the revised versions written after tutorials (Borg and Deane 2011). The writing tutorials examined in this study lasted 50 minutes and were designed to promote students' independence as scholars by offering them strategies to revise their own writing.

The tutors at the Centre do not comment on the content of draft assignments or offer to proofread them. Instead, they analyse whether a student's draft meets the requirements of the assignment brief and discuss the following features with students:

- The logic of the main argument and supporting arguments
- The coherence of ideas
- The relevance and rigour of the evidence employed
- The integration of source material
- The presence of critical thinking and analysis
- The genre and audience awareness
- The clarity of written expression

This list is not exhaustive, and the strength of individualised tutorials is that a student can request a focus in negotiation with a writing tutor. Writing tutors undertake a complex process of analysis as they read students' drafts to offer feedback, and another goal of this investigation was to break down some of this expertise into some key constituents. With this aim, the researchers identified the following three research questions:

- What types of changes do students make to their draft assignments as a result of individualised writing tutorials?
- Are the changes students make in line with the topics discussed during individualised writing tutorials?
- Can the changes students make be systematically described?

Anecdotally, writing specialists know that the impact of one-to one dialogue and personalised feedback on a draft can be far-reaching by helping writers to gain confidence and develop strategies they can apply to future projects. Studies of student writers' perceptions of the impacts of tutorials are valuable (Bell 2000 and Leibowitz *et al.* 1997) but they do not account for actual changes in students' writing as this study sought to do. Measuring the changes students make to their drafts after attending a tutorial is not only complex, but also problematic because a variety of factors beyond the tutorial interplay and impact upon a writer's development. Any revision activity, with or without feedback from a writing specialist, would result in changes and there are many influences beyond the scope of the

research which could potentially affect student writers, including their use of study guides, instruction from course tutors, and growing familiarity with the conventions of their subject area as they progress through their studies and gain feedback on written assessments.

Based on the data collected by the team at the Centre, the following areas were identified as issues addressed by students and tutors during tutorials:

- Fulfilment of the assignment brief (genre awareness)
- Information structure (the logic of the overall argument)
- Sentence structure (the logic within sentences)
- Use of vocabulary (appropriate academic level)
- Proof reading (including referencing) (Borg and Deane 2011).

The study revealed that students make changes in the five areas listed above, which can improve the clarity and coherence of their writing. It indicated that the changes students made were largely consistent with the notes made by writing tutors and the advice they offered. It also suggested that it is possible to identify a range of outcomes from individualised writing tutorials. This small-scale project was not dependent upon external funding, but relied upon Erik Borg's expertise in research methods and team work of staff at the Centre. Although it was motivated by an economic need to identify the outcomes of tutorials, this requirement was exploited by writing teachers to inquire into the process of interaction between tutors and students working one-to-one. The project's success was dependent upon the writing tutors' expertise and willingness to take part in research.

Whilst the tutors generated data for this study, the practical constraints of timetabling and the parameters of their positions meant that they were not directly involved in data analysis, and this irony is central to the argument in this paper that mechanisms must be put in place by managers to facilitate teacher research into writing. The best practical measures for instigating teacher research are context-bound, but there are arguably three common factors involved in promoting inquiry into writing development:

1. Debate between writing teachers about the challenges they face and possible solutions.
2. Time to gather and analyse data.
3. Freedom to draw on findings to change pedagogic practice.

Whilst the mix of traditions of writing development in the UK can represent a hurdle for scholarly inquiry, this context is also a potential opportunity for innovative research, as specialists from a range of disciplinary backgrounds come together to discuss their pedagogies. There can also be benefits in the fluidity of provision for student writers in Britain as no single model pervades teaching practice.

Suggestions and Conclusions

In summary, what can be done to promote teacher inquiry, applied pedagogic research, and/or action research as a more integral part of college composition and writing support programs? Here are some suggestions to create a culture of teacher inquiry or practitioner research:

1. Incorporate the prospect of applied research into job descriptions.
2. Make regular space for sharing brainstorming on questions of mutual interest.
3. Offer small grants, rewards, or additional merit for those who take on action research projects and require that those projects be shared in program, departmental, or institutional settings.

4. Ensure that adjunct, contract, and permanent staff on fractional contracts have access to scholarship of all kinds in the field.
5. Have resources on action or practitioner research available for staff as well as examples of excellent published action research on hand.
6. Locate additional partners across the university or community.
7. Use the results of action research to actively revise and reshape programs on an ongoing basis so that the research really matters, and write up those efforts in annual reports and memos to administrators and other stakeholders.
8. Create formal presentation activities that invite members of the larger academic or local community to participate in the presentation of action research process.
9. Locate or create venues for broader 'publication' through websites and regional publications.
10. Integrate action research into graduate school training. There is relatively little attention to research of all kinds in graduate programs; US universities are graduating PhDs in Composition Studies who are not always familiar with how to read empirical research, which is a problem that goes well beyond the relative invisibility of action research.
11. Develop and share information about new venues for collaboration and dissemination of the results of action research and teacher inquiry. Joan Mullin and her colleagues are already working on this issue via a web-based research collective,⁵ but their work needs to be better publicized. Yes, teacher inquiry is local, but now it is also global with many international networks of action-researcher. Think of the benefits of creating a network of writing literacy teachers/consultants and programs discussing their work with each other, all over Europe and America.
12. Educate promotion, tenure, merit and grants committees so that they recognize and appropriately reward teacher research among full-time and part-time college faculty. This should be elementary, but it still is not, so it sends a message to faculty that the only criteria that should count for tenure and promotion are those that have counted in the past. We can only hope the work of Boyer (1990) on SoTL will continue to gain acceptance in the right university committees.
13. Integrate action research and teacher inquiry work more fully into the professional landscape, making room for the knowledge developed in this manner.

College composition teachers can learn from each other more effectively if they have the results of others' work readily available, in a form they can easily use. Tutors at a writing centre can spend an afternoon retreat or colloquium discussing each others' action research projects; part-time or full-time non-tenure track faculty (as well as full-time) can learn from each others' action research projects. This leads to ongoing program renewal and development. Also, research with writing specialists and other subject specialists working together is very important for WAC/WID program innovation.

This paper has opened a potentially important discussion about introducing university-level writing instructors to research on their own teaching. Literacy-based practitioner research has been much more common in primary and secondary settings, but rarely used in college and university contexts, and the large non-permanent teaching staff of first-year writing programs in the United States, just like

⁵ The Research Exchange now serves as a site where scholars can share research-in-progress, obtain mentoring, exchange and post examples of methodologies, and publish early work on research projects. It also serves as a site on which data can be aggregated, where researchers can combine methodologies for new studies, and where students can see models of research in action and add to knowledge-making' (Research Exchange n.d.).

the writing centre tutors in the example from Britain, have generally not been identified or promoted as the agents of important writing program research. It is hoped that this modest beginning will lead to a richer discussion of this issue in Europe and the US. As Ruth Ray states:

Graduate faculty in English departments will need to reassess their traditional views of teaching as a form of transmission and a mere service to the institution, reconsidering it as an intellectual enterprise and a dynamic form of inquiry (1992: 186).

The obverse is also true. As Freeman (1998) proposes, 'To truly make research a central part of teaching, we must redefine research'. He reminds us, following Michelle Fine's work, that we need to work at the hyphen: teacher-research, action-research, practitioner-inquiry (1998: 5). This is a tall order, but the authors of this article are in favor of such a change. They are also in favor of the change Chris Anson has called for:

To encourage a stronger culture of research in composition, multiple levels of research need to be acknowledged and accepted. Not all research needs to take the form of major, sophisticated, large-scale studies. A long tradition, and much scholarship, supports reflective practice and investigations grounded in classrooms (such as action research, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and the like, see Myers). These and other forms of localized inquiry provide teachers, administrators, and scholars with a context for thinking in more research-oriented ways about practice. Existing research, potential research, and praxis can exist in cyclic relationship with each other (2009: 31).

With the right kind of leadership and support, part-time and non-tenure track writing instructors can take a leading role in their programs, producing quality research and genuine knowledge.

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