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Connecting

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Connecting

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CONNECTING

Risks and Rewards of Purposeful Vulnerability

Christy I. Wenger

Embracing vulnerability is difficult. When writers risk vulnerability, we invite exposure and uncertainty. *Will we be read? Will we be judged? Can we still persuade?* Vulnerability is often construed as weakness brought on by personal failure, only on display by accident when we let our guard down. Yet, vulnerability can be a powerful, rhetorical choice harnessed by writers.

The following collection of writings captures the challenge of embracing vulnerability as writers, teachers, and learners—but the authors also point to the rewards of opening up to students, to colleagues, to ourselves. Anchoring this section's theme, Christine Martornana reviews Ruth Behar's anthropology to suggest that we consciously position ourselves as "vulnerable observers" to embrace the ways vulnerability, in contrast to objectivity, can open us up to greater connections with our research participants and our students. Behar's strategic vulnerability brings to mind Donna Haraway's scathing indictment of scientific objectivity, which undergirds the modern university. Seeking a feminist alternative akin to the vulnerable observer, Haraway calls out the objective, scientific observer as "an authorized ventriloquist for the object world, adding nothing from his mere opinions, from his biasing embodiment. And so he is endowed with the remarkable power to establish the facts. He bears witness: he is objective; he guarantees the clarity and purity of objects" (24). It is precisely because such objectivity has been granted so much value in academic writing that we currently see vulnerability as a "risk" to avoid, rather than a worthwhile challenge to pursue. Behar's concept of the vulnerable observer is a feminist alternative to such objectivity that provides a useful lens to view all the writings in this section.

For Martornana, the choice to be a vulnerable observer is a choice to participate in the very "zine" writing she studies. It helps her decenter her authority of researcher and experience firsthand the materialist, personal genre of writing she studies. Inspired by her experiences of being a vulnerable participant-observer in the classroom, Martornana takes a deeper look at her teacherly expectations in the classroom and is forced to examine the opportunities she provides students to connect to their writing. She ultimately provides more spaces for students' purposeful vulnerability through invited explorations of their personal motivations for writing and researching.

Personal writing is the focus of Jacquelyn E. Hoermann-Elliott's narrative, which combines her reflections on teaching personal writing, prompted by the experience of writing with students her own "This I Believe" essay—an assignment given in her first-year writing classes. Also made vulnerable by the purposeful self-practice of writing with

students, Hoermann-Elliott finds connections between her writing, teaching, and yoga practice, making her reflect on the importance of metacognition in teaching writing.

Meanwhile, Beth Godbee and Adrienne Wojcik detail their collaborative partnership as they coded Godbee's interviews of tutors and tutees within writing centers. Godbee and Wojcik engage in a purposeful vulnerability by reading and learning new ways of seeing the interview data from each other's perspectives. As vulnerable observers of each other's interpretations, this research team draws agency from their collaborative experience as it occurs. As they learn to embrace the ambiguity that their different interpretations present, they also learn about themselves as researchers.

Finally, Laurence Musgrove's poems, "Dress Up" and "Tree," explore this process of opening up and letting go of our own perspectives long enough to see another's. These poems ask us to look deeply at ourselves and the people and the material objects around us in order to generate more meaningful encounters. Musgrove's poems thus encourage us to consider how listening and seeing are essential to opening a space where purposeful vulnerability is welcomed and acknowledged, a space where scientific objectivity is stripped of its power.

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Embracing Vulnerability in Research and Teaching

Christine Martorana

Ruth Behar reflects on her experiences as an anthropologist observing and writing about other people's lives. Troubled by the distance she feels between her role as an anthropologist and the people she observes, Behar suggests that anthropologists adopt the stance of the vulnerable observer. The vulnerable observer, she explains, "use[s] her own experiences in her research, writing, and teaching" (10). Rather than adopting the academic tenets of "distance, objectivity, and abstraction," she chooses to highlight her personal connections to her research (13). In support of this stance, Behar offers the example of the anthropologist studying mood disorders who chooses to reveal that her

research is motivated by her own family history with manic-depressive illness.

Although I am not an anthropologist, I can relate to Behar as a feminist researcher. I am a feminist compositionist who studies feminist perzines, a subgenre of zines that spotlights the personal experiences and opinions of the zine writers—otherwise known as zinesters. Put briefly, zines are handmade “self-publication[s], motivated by desire for self-expression, not for profit” (Freedman). Zines come in many diverse shapes and sizes, and they cover a myriad of topics ranging from parenting and social justice issues to traveling, music, and comics. My research on feminist perzines has led to several conference presentations, a university-sponsored research project, and a forthcoming book chapter—each of which shines a spotlight on the innovative, creative, and thoughtful composing strategies of feminist zinesters. However, as I follow my research interest into the world of feminist perzines, I find myself wondering, *Am I actually doing these women a disservice by inviting the mainstream, academic gaze to fall on this community of writers? What does it mean that I am shining an academic light on such personal, intimate experiences?*

In Behar’s work, I find a response to these questions. Specifically, Behar offers the vulnerable observer as one way in which “women [can] make other women the subjects of their gaze without objectifying them and thus ultimately betraying them” (28). This perspective aligns so closely with my own goals as a researcher that I have committed to embracing the vulnerable observer identity in my research with feminist perzines. Although I can imagine the vulnerable observer identity taking many forms, in my work, becoming a vulnerable observer means participating in the very genre of writing that I study. It means entering the zine world as more than a researcher. It means experiencing firsthand the intricacies of creating and distributing a perzine, of making myself vulnerable just as my research participants do. It means that not only do I write *about* perzines, but I also write perzines.

In October of 2016, I embarked on my first attempt at creating a perzine. Uncertain of how to begin, I decided to look through my collection of perzines for inspiration. I noticed that most perzines focused on a particular theme relevant to the zinester’s life at the time, and they often start with a letter that welcomes readers and lets them know what to expect in the coming pages. So, I decided to start there, and it was in the process of writing this letter that I discovered the name of my perzine: *Practice*. I wrote, “Practice what we preach, right? How can I be a feminist writing about feminist perzines if I have never experienced what it is to write one? To be vulnerable and open to readers I may or may not know?”

I decided to focus this first issue of *Practice* on my own experiences with anxiety and disordered eating. I’m not going to describe the contents of my perzine here. If you would like to see this issue, I’d be happy to send a copy. Instead, I am going to reflect on this process of embracing vulnerability. As I sat on my living room floor, surrounded by paper, glue, markers, and other crafting tools, I could feel uncertainty and tension gathering in the pit of my stomach. It was not the act of writing that garnered these feelings. Rather, it was the knowledge that I was preparing to share these experiences with an audience. This audience felt both known and unknown to me, and, honestly, it was the known portion of this audience that made me the most nervous. Most people in my life do not know about my continuing struggles with anxiety, and I wondered how

knowing about this would impact their conceptions of who I am and their interactions with me. Would I suddenly seem more fragile and less stable? Should I censor myself, limit the level of personal sharing, so as not to degrade my credibility as a professional and an academic?

I was not used to these feelings of uncertainty surrounding my writing. Currently, most of my writing occurs within the academic genres of article manuscripts, chapter proposals, and responses to calls for papers—genres that have anonymity embedded into them. This is not to say that these genres are void of vulnerability. When I submit a manuscript to a journal, for example, I am making myself vulnerable in that reviewers may respond with negative criticisms or outright rejection. Still, I find that the anonymity of the review process—the fact that I do not know my reviewers and they do not know me—offers a barrier that shields me from being too fully exposed as a writer and researcher. However, I quickly realized that this barrier of anonymity was nonexistent in my perzine creation process. All of the personal stories and details within *Practice* would be unmistakably my own, and all reader responses—both supportive and hostile—would be directed at me specifically.

As a composition instructor who regularly invites students to engage in personal writing, these realizations regarding anonymity and vulnerability gave me pause. When I ask students to write personal narratives or otherwise put their personal perspectives in writing, I am asking students to embrace vulnerability. Not vulnerability coupled with the shield of anonymity, but rather full vulnerability, complete with the risks of self-exposure and outside evaluation. As I crafted *Practice* and grappled with the apprehensions of sharing myself, I wondered, *do my students experience similar feelings of uncertainty at the thought of sharing themselves with an evaluative audience? Do they censor themselves and their self-presentations? How can I cultivate a classroom space where personal writing is productive rather than anxiety-producing?*

I arrived at one response to these questions as I continued through the process of becoming a vulnerable observer. Despite my initial uncertainties, I decided to fully embrace the vulnerability, to write honestly and candidly about the ways in which anxiety has colored my past and continues to impact me today. I have since come to more fully understand this kind of sharing as an act of feminist agency. Patriarchal society teaches us that we must polish and refine ourselves for public view. We must always appear competent, confident, and self-actualized. Traditional notions of ethos remind us that it is in *overcoming* challenges that we gain authority and credibility. The assumption here is that by moving beyond an experience, the individual achieves “hindsight, reflection, and...objectivity,” whereas the significance of an in-process experience remains unknown (Foss, Foss & Griffin 8).

However, my experiences within the zine world have taught me that in-process and/or personal experiences can offer sources of authority. We need not look solely to the past for significant happenings; rather, we can “engage in self-conscious reflection about [our current] lives as women,” drawing upon and sharing in-process experiences (Foss, Foss & Griffin 6). Similarly, although personal experiences are often considered less credible because they are subjective, the reality is that objectivity is not a prerequisite for credibility. In *Daring Greatly*, Brene Brown reminds us, “In a world where scarcity and shame dominate and feeling afraid has become second nature, vulnerability is sub-

versive.” Thus, in making the choice to be vulnerable to a public audience, to share our in-process and/or personal experiences, we can challenge this patriarchal conception of self-presentation and credibility.

After I completed this issue of *Practice*, I used Twitter to invite interested readers to contact me if they wanted a copy. I received requests from people in all areas of my life—zinesters, academics, family members, friends, and complete strangers. I have received several interesting and supportive responses, most of which are from other zinesters. One such zinester sent me a handwritten letter. In it, she wrote, “We are the experts of our own existence. I won’t ever need another person to peer-review my journals on how it felt to be so lonely and isolated in my [struggles]. I lived it.” After creating *Practice* and offering my personal experiences to a public audience, I understand this statement better than ever. Interestingly, none of the academics who requested a copy of *Practice* have yet to respond. Although a response is in no way expected, I do wonder if the lack of response from my academic community is due to the fact that we aren’t yet sure how to respond to purposeful vulnerability.

While creating my first issue of *Practice*, I was also teaching a second semester first-year composition course. This is a course I have taught many times. However, as I continued to embrace vulnerability in my research, I noticed a shift in my teaching, an intentional leaning towards a more vulnerable pedagogical approach. The main assignment of the course is a research project, an assignment I have previously approached as distinct from more personal forms of writing such as narratives and reflections. However, this semester, I made specific efforts to provide opportunities for my students to keep their voices and experiences central alongside their research. For instance, I invited students to begin their research projects with an explanation of their personal motivations for conducting this research.

Not all students felt comfortable with this approach, but the ones who did crafted some very powerful statements. For instance, Mo, a student researching media depictions of Islam, begins his research with the following reflection: “I knew Islamophobia existed from a young age when I saw my mother’s headscarf get pulled off. My understanding of Islamophobia has widened as a result of my research and experiences.” Similarly, Angel, a student researching racial discrimination in the workplace, writes, “My research [began] because of something that had happened to me when I was in high school within a daycare system where they didn’t want people of color to be around kids. Through my research, I’ve learned that this is not the only place that people face racial discrimination.”

As I read my students’ writing, I realized that they were experiencing a shift in perspective similar to what I experienced when I wrote *Practice*. They were coming to a realization that our personal experiences can offer a source of credibility. Monica, a student researching second-language learners, makes this realization explicit in the reflection she turned in along with her research project. She explains, “The way I identified myself [in my research] was by stating ‘I am a Non-Native English speaker.’ [This] show[s] I’m reliable to talk about this topic because I state an actual experience I went through. . . . I presented myself like this because I want my audience to know that they are reading it from someone who understands them.” For the first time in my teaching experience, I witnessed my students presenting their personal experiences as a means of enhanc-

ing authority. That is, not only were they learning that documenting sources and citing experts is important for presenting oneself as a credible writer, but they were also seeing their own experiences as a source of credibility. My experiences writing *Practice* led me to this realization in my own life and writing, and I was excited to see my students coming to similar understandings regarding the value of their own personal experiences.

At the end of the semester, I was invited to present at my college's Dean's Symposium on my approach to teaching research. I have given similar presentations before, and my usual approach is to give an overview of relevant scholarship followed by my pedagogical application of this scholarship and several implications for the college classroom. However, motivated by my commitment to embrace vulnerability, I decided to invite Mo, Monica, and Yanique—three of my students—to present alongside me, to gain practice sharing their writing with others. At first, the students were a bit hesitant, and understandably so. They were not yet finished with their research projects, and none of these first-year students had ever presented to a college-wide audience. Did they have anything valuable to share with an audience comprised of students, faculty, and deans from the college? I assured them that they did, and the students agreed to participate in the presentation.

This presentation was unlike any other I have done. I started with a brief overview of our class and the research project assignment. I then introduced the students and gave each of them the opportunity to speak about their research projects. I did not tell them specifically what to say, and I was surprised to hear that each student started by explaining the personal motivations they held for their research. Mo described growing up as a Muslim-American. Monica claimed her identity as a non-Native English speaker, even pointing out the thick accent that accompanies her English. Yanique recounted a time when she faced gender discrimination in her job and was not sure how to handle it. Each student presented these personal experiences as sources of credibility, and they made explicit the connections between their research and their personal experiences. They presented their in-process work to a potentially unknown audience, and in hindsight, I can see that these students were embracing vulnerability.

Although this was not an intention I held for my students at the start of this semester, it was an outcome of my experiences embracing vulnerability in my own research and writing. As I reflect on these experiences, one of the biggest lessons I learned is that all personal writing is not automatically vulnerable writing—at least not as Behar defines it and as I have come to understand it. “The exposure of the self,” Behar writes, “has to take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise get to. [Vulnerable writing] can lead the reader, not into miniature bubbles of naval-gazing, but into the enormous sea of serious social issues” (14). In other words, vulnerable writing is *purposeful* personal writing aimed at connecting with and impacting worlds beyond the self. By adopting this perspective of personal writing in our research and teaching, we can become more ethical and aware scholars and teachers, capable of seeing our personal experiences as valid and valuable and inviting our students to do the same.



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Writing as a Sea of Oms: A "This I Believe" Essay for Contemplative Writing in First-Year Composition

Jacquelyn E. Hoermann-Elliott

At Texas Christian University, I teach a themed section of first-year composition called "Yoga-Zen Writing." One of the first writing assignments my students receive is a "This I Believe" essay, for which I ask students to choose a belief or a personal mantra that guides their daily living or reflects their values in a way that is personally meaningful to them. My students are prepared for the assignment by listening to several "This I Believe" podcasts—available for streaming through *Thisibelieve.org*. As a class, we write in our journals and discuss out loud how these podcasts reflect the personal essay genre outlined in Bruce Ballenger's *The Curious Writer*. The greatest challenge of this writing assignment is that students are expected to deliver one to two brief but well-detailed narrative experiences in approximately two pages, which always challenges them to winnow their words down to what is absolutely essential and memorable. Having taught this essay several times, I decided to write my own "This I Believe" essay in the fall of 2016. My intention was to refresh my memory of the process involved in writing a personal essay, and throughout the process I was reminded of how challenging personal essays can be.

In keeping with the mindfulness practices taught in my course, I begin this essay discussing my experiences with a kind of meditation called a Sea of *Oms*, a communal type of meditation in which one practitioner begins making an "Om" sound and others follow until the sound of multiple "Oms" washes over the room without anyone stopping for longer than is needed to inhale deeply. The essay begins in my yoga studio, Yogali:

Writing as a Sea of Oms

In my first sea of Oms, I felt out of control. The sound was therapeutic to hear when

coming from the other meditators, but as I sat between Om sounds, I felt the sound of my own silence hanging heavily over my head, widening the gaps of space between myself and the other yoga students, wondering if they were listening to my pause. With eyes closed, I tried to exhale deeply, contracting my navel closer to my spine, wringing all the air out of my body before my lungs could balloon wide with breath on my next inhale. My intention was to let an Om sound slide down the next long exhale, but instead my breath kept getting stuck in my throat. I could hear different voices beginning and ending a wave of Oms with little hesitation or pause, so after an unreasonable amount of effort, my inner critic faulted tone-deafness as a valid excuse for steeling my lungs with cold, stagnant air and relinquished the possibility of my Oms creating warm and silky sounds like those I heard coming from the others.

Defined only by an aural essence, not words, Om has long remained a symbolic syllable, vibrating across the experience of creation, first (with an “ah” sound), the maintenance of life energy, second (with an “oh” sound), and the grounding feeling of transformation, third (with an “oom” sound) before silence inevitably follows as the lungs begin to fill with air once more. In a Sea of Oms, yoga practitioners and meditators can lift up their voices on the long lilt of a vowel sound, one after another, overlapping and overflowing out into space without hesitation or embarrassment. The sound washes over bodies and unclenches the tightest of minds.

A few months later, at the end of another yoga class, I waded through my second Sea of Oms. I found myself freezing, at times, my lungs feeling unnecessarily tight and rigid. At other times, though, my Om felt more natural, almost softer than before. Each inhalation brought a subtle chill of fresh air, and a few exhalations brought a balmier breath up to my throat. Letting go of my breath without inhibition made the rinsing effect of the Om sound easier to enjoy as the sensation of each sound rippled out through the rest of my body, bringing me to an important meditative insight on that day: my inner writer creates, and my inner critic consumes.

Those first three paragraphs in my essay excerpt above were the most challenging ones to write because I carried the responsibility of defining an ancient tradition, the chanting of “Om,” and describing the ethereal nature of this meditation practice, which is unlike any other style of meditation I’ve encountered. I learned, though, that defining a relatively unknown cultural practice for an unfamiliar audience challenged my pre-writing understanding of the experience, reaffirming that the genre of “This I Believe” essays presents opportunities for students to engage in a metacognitive style of reflection that is rarely realized in any activity other than writing. In the next section of my essay below, I expand my previous mention of my inner critic, building up to the lesson I want my student readers to retain:

I believe that creativity comes at writers like a reverberating Sea of Oms. When creativity decides to perch up in my office and shoot the breeze, it’s usually because she’s heard that my inner critic was dropped off at a Starbucks or left on a meeting room table after I mentioned a fruitful idea to my Studio’s director. When creativity knocks once with an idea, there’s usually a second and a third knock, sometimes too many knocks to handle as I try to write all the ideas down before the scope of my creative endeavor gets out of control. Even so, I welcome every idea and start to study them as they swirl around in my mind. Why? Because eventually creativity’s wild brainstorming session will come to an end in the same way the sound of the Om will trickle away in silence before the next sound is created by some inhibitionless voice. Much like the first “ah” sound that forms an Om, I always begin by creating some kind of energy before I

know exactly when that “ah” will be transformed into an “oh,” bringing with it a grounding feeling of satisfaction. Creative moments satiate my mind.

As a consumer of words, I know, too, that taking in the many words already written in articles and books can feed my inner critic. Any text sugared by someone else’s lovely language only makes me crave more sugar—rather than working to sweeten what I already have. Paying too much attention to other people’s Oms may feel relaxing, initially, but listening never fulfills my need to create the sound in my own mind. Notes in my meditation logs make perfectly clear the days when I’ve been most receptive to creativity and the days when I’ve felt most trapped by my inner critic’s mindless chatter. What I find most helpful are the opportunities to create alongside other writers and to submit my voice to a group of meditators collaborating in a Sea of Oms. In both creation practices, ideas move with me and through me with a nonjudgmental awareness of what’s possible for me, and for having struggled to create in both contexts, I’ve learned to let go of the writerly tendency to consume.

On a primary level, I began this personal writing assignment to reinvigorate how I teach this genre. On a secondary level, I began to realize that through the writing of this essay I could also teach my students more about a style of meditation that hasn’t been popularized by mainstream media or the fitness industry. The tertiary benefit I did not anticipate was how meaningful this personal essay would feel to me. My thoughts on writing as a sea of oms relates to my struggle to walk a tightrope of creativity and consumption, a challenge I’ve since discussed in class with my students. For this first-year composition course, I did not ask my students to engage in practicing a Sea of Oms for several reasons, such as the extended amount of time it takes to begin and end this practice and my own newness with the practice. What was most rewarding overall was feeling challenged by a genre I thought I understood so well, only to be reminded that what my students learn, I must always strive to relearn.



Decoding Each Other through Coding: Sharing Our Unlikely Research Collaboration

Beth Godbee and Adrienne Wojcik

This narrative is a story of our cross-disciplinary collaboration. While teachers and researchers in English studies often share stories of teaching, we too infrequently share those of research. The consequence is that the everyday, lived experiences of conducting inquiry and doing research—the key intellectual activities in *all learning*—become muted, if not hidden. In response, we relate here our journey of teaching and learning the method of qualitative coding.

It's late Wednesday afternoon, as we're finishing our first collaborative coding session. The two of us look up from our laptops. We have papers, notes, and hot tea spread across the small, round table in Beth's office. We've each just reviewed the same bit of transcript, a document representing one of Beth's interviews conducted with writers and tutors who meet regularly in campus and community writing centers. Now we're ready to compare our qualitative "codes," or labels for recurring patterns that we've added to the transcript. These codes reveal the themes and outliers we've identified through analysis of the data.

By this point, Beth has reviewed this and other transcripts many times, as she conducted and transcribed the interviews for her dissertation research in composition, rhetoric, and literacy studies. Now a faculty member at Marquette University, Beth has been working with these transcripts for years, yet still finds new ways of interpreting what she reads and continues to be curious and surprised by what emerges. In contrast, Adrienne has never coded before. As a doctoral candidate in Victorian literature and a research assistant (RA) in Marquette's English Department, Adrienne has performed a range of research tasks from locating and copying sources to checking references and editing manuscripts. This coding project is her first venture into qualitative research, and she's still making sense of new terms like "qualitative analysis" and "coding."

On this late Wednesday afternoon, the two of us compare our initial coding categories, and we find more common ground than one might imagine. We both note the importance of tutoring relationships and the ways in which roles are conflated (e.g., a tutor is also considered a writing confidant, a friend, a student, and a colleague). Alongside these patterns, we also notice some intriguing differences, such as how we understand what it means when a writer says she values the tutor's "voice" and having that person's voice in her head. Does a coding category like "VOICE" refer only to one's literal speaking voice or the voice represented through writing or even imagined, perceived, or desired voices? Such questions open, for us, the ongoing discussion, rethinking, and refinement of coding categories.

At first, our collaboration may seem unlikely, if not misaligned. Neither Adrienne's studies in literature nor her typical work as an RA directly apply to this project. Given our different disciplinary orientations, research interests, and methodologies, it's possible that we never would have met (or at least not collaborated) within our department. Yet, whether coincidental or serendipitous, this unlikely collaboration has led to our own research-and-writing relationship. Together, we have analyzed a number of interview transcripts, furthering Beth's research agenda and giving Adrienne hands-on research experience, while we are learning to think more creatively together. Through an ongoing process of teaching and learning qualitative coding—a process that began with our side-by-side coding on this Wednesday afternoon—we've learned and taught each other to see the same data in different ways. We've built a collaborative relationship that has allowed for mentoring beyond the coding project, and we've considered the value of sharing research stories like the one we relate here.

Seeking a Research Partner (Beth)

As a qualitative researcher, I appreciate having multiple people—multiple analysts or reviewers—involved in processing, discussing, and especially *coding* data. Not only do multiple perspectives bring new insights into a project, but multiple perspectives also raise new questions that help with seeing and re-seeing emergent patterns. Over the years, I have worked closely with interview transcripts—reading them line-by-line, noting patterns within and across interviews, and linking codes with prominent categories within my conceptual framework. That said, when returning to the transcripts after conducting a series of follow-up interviews, I knew that a fresh approach would help me to fill in gaps and cover new ground.

In our department, faculty members submit requests to be paired with RAs, all of whom are graduate students in literary studies. Luckily, Adrienne and I had been matched with each other previously, and so she was familiar with my larger project focused on relational communication (and identifying how writing relationships can bolster writers and their assertions of epistemic rights). When I asked Adrienne if she was open to learning qualitative coding, she showed willingness to learn and began reading both methodological guides and documents framing the project, including grant proposals, initial findings, and one of my previous articles. I also shared with Adrienne the full methods chapter of my dissertation, which included (1) names of codes and sub-codes, (2) definitions, and (3) examples of each. The following is an example of one initial code, which we revised and folded under a broader category of “RELATIONS” through our re-coding process:

NOT ALONE—coming to recognize that you’re not alone, not an anomaly; being vulnerable with/to another person; hearing others’ stories and finding strength together

Example from Jane (pseudonym), writer in the main writing center:

“You know dissertations can be a very dreadful experience. It’s alone. Because nobody can help you with the writing. You have to do it yourself. It’s a very lonely journey that you are doing. But this long-term working with [Tutor’s Name] and developing a relationship—not only does she know my dissertation, but I know she will be very happy when I start collecting data. She *was very happy* when I finished my collecting data. ‘Oh! That’s wonderful.’ I would always tell her what’s the status: ‘I’m now going through IRB, going through [Hospital Name’s] IRB. Now I can do this. Now I can do that!’”

While reviewing these materials and reading interview excerpts like the one above, Adrienne also completed training modules for Marquette’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and reviewed some of my past coding (to get a sense of the process). From there, we began working in a shared google folder, where Adrienne and I constructed documents to define and refine our coding categories, to organize coded and uncoded transcripts, and to document questions and concerns. As Adrienne added to these materials, we also met

weekly: at first, checking in about our research goals, then coding together, then coding separately, and finally with Adrienne coding on her own and reporting on each week's findings. The process was emergent and spanned more than a year's time, leading to in-depth conversations ranging from discussion of writing and writing centers (the focus of the study) to comparisons of qualitative coding with other research methods (particularly with close reading, the method Adrienne is using for her dissertation research).

Discovering My Inner Coder (Adrienne)

None of my previous RA responsibilities involved data analysis, so coming into this project, I wasn't sure what to expect. What I learned is that unlike some of the more clerical tasks associated with my research assistantship, this work truly engaged me *as a researcher*, as someone who needed deep intellectual engagement to make sense of "raw data." Although I was not involved in gathering the data, I critically analyzed it as a true collaborator in research.

Even at the beginning stage, I was excited about qualitative coding: though this method of reading text was entirely new to me, it reminded me of the close reading method I often use as a literary scholar. Right away I saw similarities. With both qualitative coding and close reading, the researcher pays careful attention to the written text, looks for recurring themes that shape meaning, and pinpoints evidence in the text itself. With both methods, the researcher brings their own theoretical perspectives and personal subjectivities, which shape the analysis in particular ways, even when efforts are made toward the most fair or unbiased reading possible. And with both methods, the researcher wants others to *trust* their analysis and, therefore, works to ensure that readings/findings are reasonable to others.

After our initial coding session on the Wednesday we describe, I began reading and reviewing transcripts on my own. I became confident after coding alongside Beth, feeling reassured that our codes mostly aligned. However, we also quickly discovered some differences when we coded the same sections, which alerted us to the need for a few additional coding categories in some cases, and the need to collapse categories in other cases. As an example, within just a few weeks, I saw that the code "VALUE" could mean anything the participants valued: from visiting the writing center and working with a particular writing partner/tutor to developing a regular writing practice to just writing itself. The potential variations and *many* sub-codes of "VALUE" became too numerous to count, and the category ceased being useful as it began to describe all responses rather than any unique pattern/phenomenon.

Even as I worked to add, refine, and define codes and sub-codes, I wanted to be sure that my coding didn't change the focus of Beth's qualitative inquiry. After all, every categorization indicates a new way of reading the text and encourages a new interpretation of the broader pattern/phenomenon. Therefore, I met with Beth often, gained familiarity with the research questions, and also practiced keeping a list of tentative changes (e.g., new sub-codes and suggested deletions) that we talked through before implementing.

In addition to the actual qualitative coding, much of my work involved writing clear definitions and compiling illustrative examples of the various codes and sub-codes. This

definitional work involved noticing connections and cross-referencing categories whenever they appeared to overlap with regularity. As the list of codes and sub-codes grew and grew, I eventually had a document of twenty-six pages and fourteen primary codes. Such a long list reflected the subtlety of codes and the noting of outliers in addition to recurring themes. Yet, the long list also became impractical and overwhelming to use. As I conflated and clarified codes and sub-codes, I was able to trim the list to two pages with six codes—a more manageable list that represented the data more clearly.

Throughout this process, I discovered that researchers must know their data well—and must have sifted through multiple iterations and explanations of likely categories before settling on ones that *best* describe patterns. Though time-intensive, this process also results in the “thick description” that ethnographers and other qualitative researchers hope to achieve in their reports. For my part as an RA, making important decisions and determining relationships among codes/sub-codes heightened my interest in the work. My experience as an RA no longer involved the semi-drudgery of collecting and reproducing materials, but required my interpretation of it. I really enjoyed the room for interpretation and creativity in the research process. The more I could clarify the codes, the more I wanted to understand the meaning of their relationships, and in this way, I could see myself truly contributing to original research.

De-Coding Each Other through Coding

We share here our stories side-by-side to highlight the teaching and learning involved in research activities, hoping to emphasize a mindful, relational approach to learning via research. Many of us participate in collaborative research, many of us spend our time sorting through large data sets or textual materials, and many of us supervise or work as RAs. Though our narrative only scratches the surface of much larger matters, we hope that by sharing it, we invite and inspire others stories of research. Imagine if we took seriously the mandate to record research as “learningful” experiences in need of narration, in need of unveiling messy and relational processes of meaning-making.

In our case, we appreciate what the other person contributed to this coding project. As a faculty member, I (Beth) especially appreciated having another person involved in research, making what could be a solitary process social and relational. Thinking *meta*, Adrienne and I were building our relationship and coming to understand each other (i.e., de-coding each other) as we were coding participants’ self-reports into *why* relationships matter in the writing process. Not only did we come to value the other’s insights, questions, and sometimes-challenges—preventing a too-easy or too-simple coding schema—but we also learned to value the other’s disciplinary training and position.

As a research assistant, I (Adrienne) especially valued the opportunity to do meaningful research work (beyond piecemeal or clerical tasks). Even as I was challenged by working outside my primary research area, I also brought the habits of mind and my experience of reading texts closely into qualitative analysis. More than just seeing similarities between coding and close reading, I used my training in literary studies to participate in cross-disciplinary research and to learn another methodological approach. Further, the hours spent coding led me to think more about the ways I approach texts and to think in terms of “patterns” and “outliers” (the language of qualitative analysis).

This learning now lingers in the back of my mind as I continue with my own dissertation research, seeking to explain why texts matter and what they have to say, similar to what participants communicate through interviews.

On that Wednesday afternoon, now several years ago, we opened ourselves to learning with, alongside, and from each other. Not only were we learning from the participants and their interview transcripts, but we were also learning from each other's backgrounds, disciplinary orientations, and ways of understanding the world. Openness to such learning and teaching typically defines collaborative research, yet needs to be developed and practiced again and again within faculty-RA relationships and mentoring. Just as qualitative coding asks us to look and look again, we ask you, as readers: Where might unlikely collaborations be found in your life? How might they enhance your research projects? And how might we consider research itself and related research relationships as part of our expanded perspectives on learning?



Dress Up

Laurence Musgrove

If there's an end to the words
We use to control each other,
I can't see it from where I sit
And I expect you can't either.
After we made this machine,
It started making other machines
That made even more machines.
Still, it's all the same language
Made to keep us (every one of us)
Under its thumb, because once
We start letting our feelings
Refuse to play dress up in letters,
No telling what'll happen next.

Tree

When I'm not covering it with
My hands and paper and books
You can see the wood of my desk
And the grain pooling on top
Or spreading across the surface
Like a river in a hurry flows
Where a tree once stood and drank
When the clouds had plenty to pour
Or the years when the river sat dry
And those are the years it made
The story this wood is telling us now.

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