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Mapping Knowledge-Making in Writing Center Research: A Taxonomy of Methodologies

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About the Authors

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The subject is research in Writing Center Studies . . . again. But this article does not rehash why the writing center community needs such activity, that is, "to legitimate writing center work through the production of scholarship and research, to understand and improve writing center practice, and to prove the writing center's value to local institutions" (Gillam 6). Nor does it lament an inability of writing centers to reach "their potential as sites of research" or to contribute "significantly to the body of research on writing and the teaching of writing" (Kinkead and Harris 23). Instead, it addresses Alice Gillam's observation in *Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation*, that "What has been missing" in the debate about useful knowledge in writing center work "are discussion and assessment of various methodologies for their appropriateness" (4).

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In response, this article proposes a taxonomy of methodologies to understand how knowledge is — and can be — made in the complex context of writing centers. As coauthors, we held intense conversations as we constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed the taxonomy. We found it to be a powerful tool to generate critical thinking, helping us to classify, critique, and retrieve knowledge. Likewise, we believe it can serve various audiences. For example, those experienced in writing center research may find the taxonomy affirming as they recognize their methodologies of preference or perhaps challenging as they consider how alternative methodologies might be used to investigate their research interests from other perspectives. Graduate students and those beginning careers in writing centers may use it to explore the variety of methodologies they might employ as researchers and to categorize and critique the studies they read. The taxonomy is not meant to pigeonhole research or to privilege one methodology over another. Rather, we offer it as a way to extend the conversation regarding research methodologies and epistemological debates.

For the purposes of this article, we define research broadly as any intellectual activity directed at answering a question by using discernable methods to create knowledge. Our taxonomy emphasizes methodology, an "underlying theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed," rather than method, "a technique or way of proceeding in gathering evidence," definitions we borrow from Gesa Kirsch ans Patricia Sullivan (Introduction 2). Our question, then, is, What methodologies does the writing center community employ to make knowledge about writing, writers, and learning to write? To answer it, we begin by reviewing early research taxonomies in Composition Studies, the discipline whose methodologies writing center researchers have tended to employ. Then, based on analyses of a broad sampling of writing center literature, we define a taxonomy of methodologies for writing center research with three broad categories: Practitioner Inquiry, Conceptual Inquiry, and Empirical Inquiry. Within each category we delineate methodologies, using exemplary studies to illustrate distinctive features. Next, we encourage methodological pluralism, urging researchers to increase their flexibility and so create knowledge in multiple modes. Finally, we

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emphasize how questions, positions, and intentions help researchers negotiate the terrain of Writing Center Studies.

Tracing the Origins of a Taxonomy of Methodologies for Writing Center Research

The writing center community learns from various disciplines, most notably Composition Studies. Between 1983 and 1993, as Composition Studies grew as a discipline, five influential books on writing research helped to articulate more precisely its research agenda: *Research on Writing: Principles and Methods*, edited by Peter Mosenthal, Lynne Tamor, and Sean A. Walmsley (1983); *New Directions in Composition Research*, edited by Richard Beach and Lillian S. Bridwell (1984); *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field*, by Stephen M. North (1987); *Composition Research: Empirical Designs*, by Janice M. Lauer and J. William Asher (1988); and *Methods and Methodology in Composition Research*, edited by Gesa Kirsch and Patricia A. Sullivan (1992). All five texts have significantly affected knowledge-making in Composition Studies by serving as training manuals on research design and defining discipline-specific terminology. Collectively they illustrate how Composition Studies has conceptualized its research, valuing certain methodologies and methods, neglecting others, and often reacting to what has come before.

A brief overview, with the aim of detecting trends in these foundational texts, will contextualize our taxonomy. Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia, in *Research on Writing*, propose six "Levels of Inquiry in Research on the Composition Process." Moving from Reflective Inquiry, Empirical Variable Testing, and Text Analysis to Process Description, Theory-embedded Experimentation, and Simulation, the authors claim that "the higher levels of inquiry are not seen to be any way better than lower levels." Rather, their scheme is meant to be viewed sequentially and is "ordered on a dimension of abstractness" (4). In contrast to Bereiter and Scardamalia's taxonomy, North assigns eight types of investigators to one of three groups and explains how each distinctly and independently makes knowledge. Identifying Practitioners, Scholars (Historians, Philosophers, and

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Critics), and Researchers (Experimentalists, Clinicians, Formalists, and Ethnographers), North distinguishes among them by the kinds of questions they ask and the "set of rules for gathering, testing, validating, accumulating and distributing what they regard as knowledge" (1). Although North attempts to treat the communities equally, he privileges the work of Scholars and Researchers over that of Practitioners, a group many researchers held in low regard as composition struggled to become Composition Studies.

Lauer and Asher focus solely on empirical studies that move from descriptive to experimental research, from qualitative to "more quantitative and statistical explanation" (15). Based on methodologies popular in educational research, their taxonomy moves from left to right as follows: case study, ethnography, survey and sampling, quantitative description, prediction and classification, true experiment, quasi-experiment, and meta-analysis (16). They also acknowledge that "empirical research is only one of several types of research . . . in composition studies. Other modes of inquiry include historical, linguistic, philosophical, and rhetorical" (3). Combining this list with their taxonomy for empirical studies creates a scheme that mirrors North's, except for the absence of Practitioner Inquiry.

Two other collections, *New Directions in Composition Research* and *Methods and Methodology in Composition Research*, provide useful overviews for investigating writing processes. Beach and Bridwell describe studies in three categories: rationalism, which "begins with a collection of anomalies, or unusual cases, and by induction develops hypotheses that explain their existence"; contextualism, which "build[s] theory rather than test[s] it"; and positivism, which "defines composing-process variables or text features to be studied, derives *a priori* hypotheses, and then tests the hypotheses" (8, 9). Rather than offer a taxonomy, Kirsch and Sullivan introduce readers to ways of knowing relatively new to Composition Studies at the time—including feminist research, teacher as researcher, and discourse analysis—and highlight social constructionist approaches that use case studies and ethnography.

Six and seven years later, Mary Sue MacNealy in *Strategies for Empirical Research in Writing* (1999) and Cindy Johanek in *Composing Research: A Contextualist Paradigm for Rhetoric and Composition*

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(2000) find themselves defending the value of empirical research, especially quantitative studies, which had fallen out of favor. In particular, Johanek takes a visibly different approach. Instead of classifying methodologies, she designs a 3x4 matrix which intersects rhetorical issues (audience, researcher, and evidence) and research issues (questions, purposes, methods, and publications). Her aim is to "provide us a lens through which to see our research and our research contexts differently" in order to end the dispute "among competing theories of epistemology," what she reduces to "numbers" versus "narratives" (206).

While these texts offer different models for conceptualizing writing research, they collectively demonstrate the value of taxonomies to encourage debate on the purposes and processes of research. By identifying trends in Composition Studies research, we do not mean to imply that the discipline is unified in its research agenda and strategies. Indeed, scholars like Kirsch and Sullivan, who are cautious about categorizing methodologies, argue:

> Within this research community . . . there is little consensus that we are engaged in a common enterprise. Although writing "names" our subject, providing us with a common focus and purpose, there is considerable disagreement about the methods we use to investigate and constitute this subject. (1)

We see this "considerable disagreement" alongside discernable trends in research interests as characteristic of a thriving research community—one that intentionally seeks to discover, test, articulate, and revise best practices in their search for knowledge.

A caveat before we present our taxonomy: we are aware of the debate surrounding competing epistemological assumptions about knowledge, truth, and reality. We believe that the writing center community has moved beyond the either/or debates of positivists vs. phenomenologists or quantitative vs. qualitative evidence. Rather than proposing a taxonomy that values, even implicitly, one epistemology over another, we side with Eric H. Hobson who concludes in "Maintaining Our Balance: Walking the Tightrope of Competing Epistemologies" that the writing center community benefits by working with multiple epistemological theories rather

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than arguing which ones to exclude (74). While some might claim that embracing seemingly contradictory ways of knowing (positivism, expressivism, and social constructionist theory, to use Hobson's trio) could lead to a schizophrenic state, we view the nature of writing processes and writing center practices as complex enough to warrant making and using knowledge simultaneously in different ways. Indeed, we envision the taxonomy not as a means of limiting or labeling researchers and their actions or agendas but rather as a way to help readers understand the variety of methodological opportunities available to them.

Building a Taxonomy of Methodologies for Writing Center Research

We see Writing Center Studies as a subset of Composition Studies, rather than as a separate discipline. Accordingly, our Taxonomy of Methodologies for Writing Center Research is derived from our study of a variety of research-related materials, including research guides and theoretical texts about research from both Writing Center Studies and Composition Studies. We also examined a wide
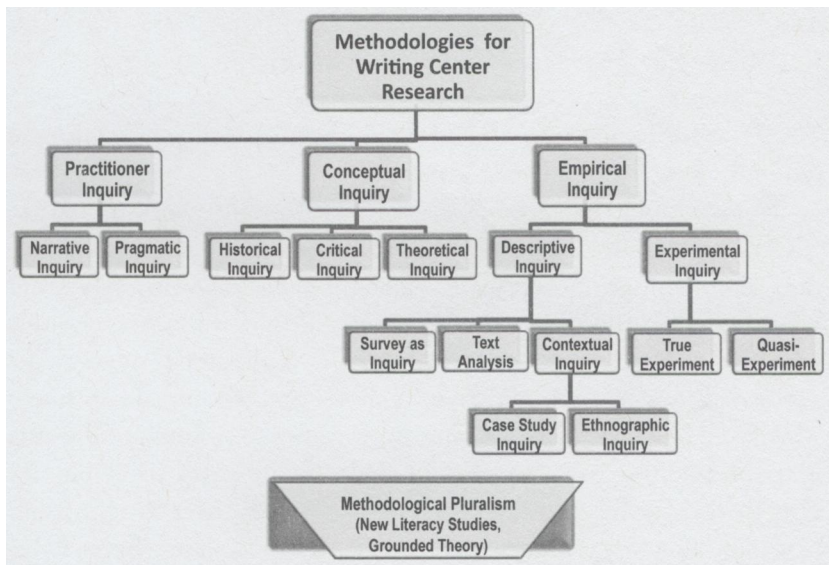

Figure 1: A Taxonomy of Methodologies for Writing Center Research

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range of examples of writing center research, especially publications recognized by the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) as Outstanding Scholarship or that provided exemplary models of specific methodologies. In the next sections, we define our three main categories (Practitioner Inquiry, Conceptual Inquiry, and Empirical Inquiry), explain what is new and what is missing in our taxonomy, and justify the methodologies included therein.

Practitioner Inquiry

In contrast to most earlier taxonomies in Composition Studies, our taxonomy for writing center research identifies Practitioner Inquiry as a distinct and important methodology. Our community has long valued the experiential knowledge of practitioners. Bereiter and Scardamalia explain that writing teachers (and we include writing tutors among this group) have "the benefit of access to an extremely important fund of information, [their] own experience[s] as . . . writer[s]." Those who engage in Practitioner Inquiry "will also have had experience as teachers of writing, and all will have been exposed to numerous samples of the writing of others" (Bereiter and Scardamalia 5). A similar wellspring of pragmatic knowledge is available to members of the writing center community who undertake Practitioner Inquiry. They may be administrators, teachers, or peer tutors, but they are also writers. Unlike a Monday-morning quarterback who has never taken a snap, writing center practitioners are on the practice field every day.

Determining the value and nature of Practitioner Inquiry for the writing center community is problematic for various reasons. One reason has to do with professional cachet. North notes that Composition Studies has over the years not only "replace[d] practice as the field's dominant mode of inquiry" but also for the most part rejected it (15), a statement that rings true more than twenty-five years later. Likewise, in an attempt to elevate the professional status of writing center work, some would prefer to avoid the labels of "Practitioner" and "Practitioner Inquiry" altogether. Others, such as Gillam, tuck Practitioner Inquiry under the broader umbrella of Empirical Inquiry. Determining the nature of Practitioner Inquiry

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is further complicated by the fact that we are all, to some degree, practitioners. And yet, our day-in-and-day-out work should not be mistaken for Practitioner Inquiry, as we explain below. Thus, its definition is important not only for our taxonomy but also for establishing and maintaining its value within and beyond our discipline.

To define Practitioner Inquiry, we both draw from and expand on North's work. Since working with writers one-on-one remains the primary *modus operandi* of writing centers, North identifies this context as the "most obvious setting" for Practitioner Inquiry: it is where students get individual attention and tutors articulate problems, search for causes, and try new strategies (44). Thus, problems find tutors in the writing center; they need not go looking for them. As a result, North labels practitioner work as "reactive: The Practitioner needs to decide what to do as a means to an end determined by someone or something else" (37). For writing center practitioners, reflection and problem solving are integral components of work. However, Practitioner Inquiry requires more than thoughtful strategizing. Testing and validation, according to North, are part of the Practitioner Inquirer's reactive approach, but he leaves open the question of how, exactly, Practitioner Inquirers go about testing and validating their work.

Distinct from Conceptual and Empirical Inquiries, the other main methodological categories in our taxonomy, Practitioner Inquiry requires a different kind of systematic investigation: Practitioner Inquirers employ reflexive, dialectical means to test and validate the knowledge they create. Though North claims that "Practitioners do not find themselves operating in the . . . Philosopher's [world of] dialectical oppositions" (24) with its "deliberate confrontation of opposing points of view" (60), we believe differently. The skilled Practitioner Inquirer examines an issue carefully through internal and external dialogues, not only seeking affirmation that ideas and interpretations are "true" but also considering them carefully against those of others who might disagree.

The Practitioner Inquirer's reflexive stance is crucial to the success of this methodology. We borrow the term "reflexive" from Donna Qualley for whom it means,

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> the act of turning back to discover, examine, and critique one's claims and assumptions in response to an encounter with another idea, text, person, or culture. . . . Reflexivity involves a commitment to both attending to what we believe and examining how we came to hold those beliefs *while we are engaged in trying to make sense of an other. . . .*(3, 5, emphasis in original)

In the writing center context, "others" may be student writers, tutors, administrators, or teachers, as well as other sources such as traditional classroom observations, listserv postings, journal articles, theoretical texts, or a variety of other entities that may challenge and deepen one's understanding. Qualley further explains that such dialogue is not "designed to produce consensus and agreement," but instead aims for an understanding of others and of self (5).

Indeed, a focus on self and self-knowledge is central to Practitioner Inquiry. We therefore see expressivist theory, with its attention to dialectic, as foundational for the Practitioner Inquirer's reflexivity. As James A. Berlin contends, this "emphasis on dialectic . . . is not an attempt to adjust the message to the audience since doing so would clearly constitute a violation of the self. Instead the writer is trying to use others to get rid of what is false to the self, what is insincere and untrue to the individual's own sense of things, as evidenced by the use of language" (773). Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln expand on the connection between reflexivity and the self: "Reflexivity is the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher. . . . It is a conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher [tutor] and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the processes of research itself" (210). Thus, through interaction with others, the Practitioner Inquirer arrives at personal truths relating to the issue or problem being examined and at self-knowledge deriving from engagement in dialectical experiences. In short, both the problem at hand and the self are the subjects of Practitioner Inquiry.

Practitioner Inquiry, then, is reflexive, experientially based research that requires dialectic to examine experience and to arrive at carefully investigated and tested personal knowledge. Without dialectic, we argue, experiential knowledge is relegated from Practitioner Inquiry to mere anecdote or untested opinion, and the

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inquirer may fail to gain what Thomas Newkirk calls "earned insight" (qtd. in Qualley 35). With intentional, substantial engagement in dialectic, however, Practitioner Inquirers contribute significantly to our research community: they offer knowledge against which other reflexive Practitioners test and validate their own understanding, and they publish and present studies that become springboards for subsequent research within other methodologies. Bereiter and Scardamalia liken such inquiry to "home base. It is the place from which other kinds of inquiry start; . . . it is where, finally, the knowledge gained through inquiry at other levels is consolidated into understanding. . . . [I]t is primary" (5).   The Practitioner Inquirer makes knowledge through two methodologies: Narrative Inquiry, which will be familiar to our audience, and Pragmatic Inquiry, a new category we offer to conceptualize further the interpretative work of the Practitioner Inquirer.

Narrative Inquiry: Narrative Inquiry employs story telling as a primary means of exploring and interpreting experiences to create knowledge through insight. "Narrative," explains Susan E. Chase, "is retrospective meaning making. . . . [It] is a way of understanding one's own and others' actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time" (656). Narrative Inquiry has been questioned in some research circles, where readers "treasure [teaching] stories for their wit, [but] do not trust them to convey knowledge" (Trimmer x). However, such skepticism seems much less prevalent among the writing center community.

Lynn Craigue Briggs and Meg Woolbright, editors of *Stories from the Center: Connecting Narrative and Theory in the Writing Center*, emphasize how the book's contributors elevate their experiences beyond anecdote: "contributors not only tell us the subjective tales of their writing center lives, but reflect on how their subjectivities were formed, they try to figure out what forces shaped their perceptions, and, whenever possible, they connect the stories to theories they have thought through" (xi). Briggs and Woolbright call this hybrid of story and theory an *academic narrative*.

The intricacies of an academic narrative are particularly evident in Michael Blitz and C. Mark Hurlbert's "If You Have Ghosts." What

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writing center tutor or director does not remember students whose writings were wrapped up in their life stories in ways that haunt us years later—did we say the right thing, do the right thing? In their essay, Blitz and Hurlbert tell stories that gnaw at them, tales about students whose situations they still recall. They relate their tutor stories and their students' personal stories, trying to figure out how to work effectively with students who "confess fears not only about literacy but about living and dying and running and hiding, about the loss of family members, of a way of life" (88). They seek insights from a dozen or more writing center figures, from emails to each other, and from creative writers of lyrics, poems, and essays to try to understand the roles of tutors—confessors, friends, "Co-conspirators in a revolution," lovers, advisors (89). Also, they question the mission of writing centers, whether they should reinforce standards of academic writing or help students to question "institutional norms and cultural values" (86). At the end of the article, the coauthors' ghosts remain, but the reader is challenged to learn from their stories.

Several other authors have recently contributed to narrative studies in writing center research in works such as *The Everyday Writing Center* (Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, and Boquet), *Noise from the Writing Center* (Boquet), and selections in *Marginal Words, Marginal Work?* (Macauley and Mauriello), confirming further the acceptance and importance of this methodology. The spring 2008 issue of *The Writing Center Journal* offers a critique of Narrative Inquiry, with four authors discussing its "functions, uses, dangers, and possibilities" (Lerner and Boquet 2). Nancy Grimm, for example, uses stories to motivate "conceptual change" with a "moral dimension." She "believe[s] writing center narratives can offer more complicated understandings of the literacies necessary for a new world order with attention to social justice" ("Attending" 7). Stories that emerge from Narrative Inquiries are not water-cooler chitchat; rather they hold the possibility of exploring "the social and political dimensions of literacy education" ("Attending" 20). In the same issue of *WCJ*, Kathryn Valentine cautions that the stories of Narrative Inquiry are "open to interpretation and re-interpretation" and may be "interpreted in ways that the writers and researchers did not

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intend or plan for" (70). Thus, Narrative Inquiry, like other research methodologies, requires a critical reader to examine the soundness of interpretation. The potential for alternative interpretations speaks to the need for Narrative Inquirers to make clear their dialectical processes, to show how they examined and arrived at interpretations of their experiences.

Pragmatic Inquiry: We propose the label "Pragmatic Inquiry" to designate a second methodology under Practitioner Inquiry. An important concept in linguistics, philosophy, and education, "pragmatics" suggests an epistemological stance that underscores the importance of context in creating meaning and the importance of practicality in investigating "truth." Rooted in the works of Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, Pragmatic Inquiry sees knowledge as growing from individual experiences, with "truth" grounded in the immediate context of the event or actions. Rather than suggesting essential "truths," pragmatic knowledge is what J. Donald Butler describes as "limited, approximate knowledge, always relative to the present unit of experience" (380). Pragmatic knowledge grows out of an intentional, conscientious thought process — what Dewey calls the "pattern of inquiry" (qtd. in Thayer 190) — producing ideas sufficient to address the problem or situation.

In the writing center context, Pragmatic Inquiry usually begins with a local, practice-related experience or observation that prompts the Practitioner to engage in research that results in local, personal, practice-related implications. The Pragmatic Inquirer, then, seeks answers to such questions as, Why did (or should, or shouldn't) X happen during a writing center session? or, How should I respond to my tutors' (or student writers' or faculty's or administrators') request that we do Y in my writing center? For Pragmatic Inquirers, valid knowledge is useful knowledge: what is "true" is what works best, what best solves the problem or best resolves the dissonance in a situation.

Like Practitioner Inquiry in general, Pragmatic Inquiry is reflexive and relies on dialectic to test and validate knowledge. Pragmatic Inquiry requires a skeptical eye: the researcher must analyze the problem or issue from a variety of angles, especially those that offer opposing interpretations or positions. Rather than seek

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quick affirmation that his initial response is correct, the Pragmatic Inquirer must constantly examine and reexamine how and why he holds some ideas to be "true." As a Pragmatic Inquirer, he must be willing to question and reject ideas that are unrealistic, impractical, or incomplete, even if those ideas are his own.

The methods of the Pragmatic Inquirer are many and varied: in addition to engaging in discussion with others (such as tutors, student writers, administrators, teachers, and writing center directors), the researcher may borrow methods used by Conceptual and Empirical researchers. Accordingly, for example, for a single Pragmatic study, the researcher might consult a body of scholarly texts, interview a group of tutors, survey student writers, post to WCenter, and observe tutoring sessions, all as strategies of engaging in dialectic and complicating her understanding of the issue. Because Pragmatic Inquiry, like Practitioner Inquiry in general, tends to be reactive, the Pragmatic Inquirer does not work with the Empirical researcher's pre-established agenda or well-crafted plan for intensive investigation over time or the Conceptual researcher's purposefully selected body of materials for interpretation. Instead, she proceeds cumulatively and recursively, gathering new information that forces her to "think again" about her understanding of the issue, to recast her questions, and to reinvestigate. The researcher's task, then, is to show how those various strategies culminate in personal insight. In publications and other presentations of Pragmatic Inquiry, a crucial component is explication of the dialectic, showing how each encounter with "an other" complicated, enriched, challenged, or confirmed the researcher's thinking.

Two strong examples of Pragmatic Inquiry have been recognized with IWCA Scholarship Awards: "Taking on Turnitin: Tutors Advocating Change," by Renee Brown and colleagues, and "Censoring What Tutors' Clothing 'Says': First Amendment Rights/ Writes Within Tutorial Space," by Margaret Weaver. When five tutors at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) found a growing number of "panicked students" (8) arriving at the writing center and telling them that Turnitin.com had identified their papers as plagiarized, the tutors grappled with an original problem. They become Pragmatic Inquirers with ever-evolving reflexive research

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plans: they examined texts from Composition Studies, rhetorical theory, and law; documents from the Turnitin website; IUP policies; and student responses on an online conversation forum. They "experiment[ed] . . . with the program" (14) by submitting different writing samples and analyzing Turnitin's reports. And they critiqued their writing center's policies and practices. At the end of their investigation, the tutors applied their understanding of Turnitin and its implications to the local situation: "Our approach . . . was to create avenues for discussions on Turnitin that tutors and other students could take in discussing problems of plagiarism and plagiarism detection services with faculty" (26). The tutors also recognized the limits of their Pragmatic Inquiry. They do not have a single *answer* to plagiarism or to Turnitin; instead, they provide their campus with a new, informed approach to the local problem: they are "doing productive work in [their] writing center rather than working to just fix the supposed problem areas of flagged texts" (12). Finally, as good Pragmatic Inquirers, the tutors value the dialectical process, using it to build their own understanding. For instance, in addition to offering information to IUP students and faculty, the tutors also presented at the joined IWCA/NCPTW (National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing) conference where they "heard even more stories about Turnitin . . . that have helped shape [their] current approaches to the Turnitin dilemma on [their] own campus" (26).

Weaver's Pragmatic Inquiry also involves legal research, this time to decide whether to set a dress code for her writing center tutors, forbidding clothing with profanity. What seems like a straightforward policy decision (yes or no) becomes complicated as her reflexive practice leads her to research legal cases of censorship and sexual harassment, poll tutors about their reactions to the (possibly) offensive t-shirt, interpret student evaluations related to the environment of the writing center, and present her case at an IWCA conference to learn from other directors. Throughout the article, Weaver documents her internal dialogue with authors of various writing center literature. She explains how her views of the writing center shift from community, to safe place, to a pluralistic experience. Weaver finally decides—for herself and for her writing center—to encourage "a disruptive environment of dialogue that

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reflects our commitment to the First Amendment, not only in spoken dialogue but in symbolic speech as well" (33). While not all readers may agree with her decision, Weaver has clearly earned her insight.

We end this section on a cautionary note. The immediate goal of Practitioner Inquiry is to create local and personal knowledge in response to a problem or a novel situation; Practitioner Inquirers overstep methodological boundaries if they attach global implications to their findings. Similarly, Practitioner Inquirers misrepresent their work if they label it otherwise; a set of interviews and participant observations, for example, may share the methods of case study and ethnography, but they do not a case study or ethnography make. Nevertheless, as illustrated in the examples above, Practitioner Inquirers do contribute to the body of knowledge which others in our community use to engage in their own dialectical, reflexive processes.

Conceptual Inquiry

Researchers who undertake Conceptual Inquiry study texts to create interpretations of what happens within writing centers and beyond in the broader contexts of writing programs and institutional hierarchies. Texts under investigation may include student writing, transcripts of tutorials, writing center documents such as manuals or mission statements, and academic articles and books or even the visual, oral, and technological contexts of center activities. With a focus on reading texts of all kinds, our three categories of Conceptual Inquiry—which match Gillam's Historical Inquiry, Critical Inquiry, and Theoretical Inquiry (Introduction xvi)—are familiar methodologies to researchers trained in literary studies, a background shared by many in the writing center community. Not surprisingly, Conceptual Inquiry is often the methodology of choice for many writing center researchers.

<u>Historical Inquiry</u>: To interpret writing center work, researchers who engage in Historical Inquiry look to the discipline's archived texts to understand the nature of our efforts over time. Researchers have often conducted archival work to chronicle a wide array of writing center operations, including the applications of technology

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in writing centers (Carino, "Computers"; Lerner, "Drill"); writing center operations pre- and post-Open Admissions (Carino, "Open"; Boquet, "Our"); the development of various programs such as the Internet Writing Consultancy (DeVoss); the influences of publications such as *The Writing Lab Newsletter* on the writing center community (Pemberton, "Writing"); the emergence and growth of the International/National Writing Centers Association (Kinkead); the historical connections between teaching writing and teaching science (Lerner, *Idea*); and even historical research on trends in writing center research (Lerner, "Seeking"). The results of these studies include "pedagogical history" and "institutional history," the two broad types of historical studies that North identifies in composition research (66-67); professional history is represented as well.

Historical Inquiry may be popular in part because it has a fairly well-established way of making knowledge. Robert Connors calls Historical Inquiry "detective work, with all the intellectual reward of problem and puzzle solving" (24). Historical Inquiry's popularity may also be attributed to a growing accessibility of primary research documents. For instance, the Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP) at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock facilitates data collection through its repository of written, visual, and oral materials and hosts back issues of *The Writing Center Journal,* all to support historical and empirical studies. *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, also archived online, likewise aids Historical Inquiry.

Critical Inquiry: Critical Inquiry is a second kind of Conceptual Inquiry with a fairly large following and growing body of work in Writing Center Studies. Like Historical Inquiry, it focuses on a systematically selected body of texts for intensive study and interpretation. The texts themselves, however, serve "as points of dialectic contact [and] provide the basis for the confrontation of more or less coherent and systematic opposed world views" (North 119). Through such a dialectic, Critical Inquirers have made knowledge concerning, among other topics, the defining functions and rhetorical strategies of writing center promotional materials (Carino, "Reading"), initiation stories in early tutor training manuals (Kail), and syllabi for graduate courses in writing center work

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(Jackson, Leverenz, and Law). In each case, the researcher gathers a set of pertinent documents, looks for and interprets selected patterns to create a new reading of the texts, and explains what the patterns contribute to disciplinary understanding.[1]

Theoretical Inquiry: In "Writing Theory : : Theory Writing," Susan Miller defines theories as "organized frames of intelligibility, systems that explain" (64). Researchers engaged in Theoretical Inquiry look beyond writing center texts to create knowledge about our work, adopting and adapting ideas from many disciplines and fields, mainly in the humanities and social sciences: rhetoric, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, education, gender studies, cultural studies, literacy studies, political science, and psychology, to name some popular sources. When describing Philosophical Inquiry (what we label "Theoretical Inquiry"), North explains, "the Composition Philosopher makes a foray into some field outside Composition itself, works to reach some degree of expertise in it, then returns ready to work out an argument about the nature of doing, learning, or teaching writing on the basis of the foraged premises" (102). We see such theoretical foraging in several articles collected in *Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation*, particularly Judith Rodby's "The Subject is Literacy: General Education and the Dialects of Power and Resistance in the Writing Center" (Marxist theory) and Jean Marie Lutes' "Why Feminists Make Better Tutors: Gender and Disciplinary Expertise in a Curriculum-Based Tutoring Program" (gender theory). The variety of theories available in other disciplines enables the writing center community, through Theoretical Inquiry, to generate a wide range of systems for explaining why we do what we do.

Empirical Inquiry

Our taxonomy identifies two primary categories of Empirical Inquiry: Descriptive Inquiry, in which the researcher gathers data within a context, and Experimental Inquiry, in which the researcher manipulates a context to gather data.

Descriptive Inquiry: Researchers making Descriptive Inquiries observe and analyze behaviors, events, and social phenomena,

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disrupting the context as little as possible. Such inquiry goes by several names: naturalistic, qualitative, phenomenological, and interpretative studies, for example. We have opted for the term *descriptive* because it reminds us that researchers reporting the outcomes of such inquiry depict and interpret what they observed within a particular context; their findings should neither be construed nor reported as *prescriptive.* Because outcomes of Descriptive Inquiry are specific to a local context, they should not be generalized to dictate global courses of action for other writing centers. Methodologies in this broad category of Descriptive Inquiry are Survey as Inquiry; Text Analysis, including discourse analysis and genre analysis; and Contextual Inquiry, such as Case Study and Ethnography.

Survey as Inquiry: Because surveys are often used as methods of collecting data for a variety of methodologies, the Survey as Inquiry may seem an anomaly. Indeed, North discounts surveys as a research methodology because he regards them as a method "to be used, most often, not to make a contribution to a knowledge-making community, but to gain political leverage." Furthermore, he finds that "no community of inquirers, united by their loyalty to this methodology, has emerged" (140). We, however, see instances where the writing center community does endorse surveys as a research methodology. Examples include two articles recognized as IWCA Outstanding Scholarship, "A View of Status and Working Conditions: Relations between Writing Program and Writing Center Directors," by Valerie Balester and James C. McDonald (2002); and "Local Practices, National Consequences: Surveying and (Re)Constructing Writing Center Identities," by Jo Ann Griffin and colleagues (2007). The latter article uses empirical data from the biannual, WCRP-sponsored Writing Centers Survey, which collects data about writing center practices, administration, and usage. While the information could support arguments for additional space, funding, and staff at the local level, the survey responses also create a nationwide mosaic of how writing centers operate, and biannual data collection makes possible longitudinal descriptive studies as well. Also of note is the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project designed by Harvey Kail, Paula Gillespie, and Bradley Hughes, a web-based research resource that supports the study of the long-term impact of writing

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center work on former tutors. Although surveys, and related methods such as interviews and focus groups, are often *methods* for gathering qualitative and quantitative data, the writing center community also uses them *methodologically* as a distinctive way of making knowledge.

Text Analysis: A second type of Descriptive Inquiry, Text Analysis, aligns with Bereiter and Scardamalia's Level 3 and includes "trying to extract descriptive rules or principles by studying written texts" in order "to discover what rules less skilled writers actually use and how these rules differ from those of experts" (10, 11). Perhaps the most widely known example of this methodology in Composition Studies is Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, a classic study of error analysis that works to understand the rules of syntax, usage, and mechanics that basic writers adhere to as they write. Or within Writing Center Studies, we can look to Muriel Harris's "Mending the Fragmented Free Modifier," a classification of the kinds of fragments in student writing and an analysis of what might cause writers to create them.

Text Analysis in writing research, however, is not restricted to the study of error. Ted J. M. Sanders and Joost Schilperoord offer a broader view: "Text analysis can be defined as the unfolding of a unity, the text, in its constituent parts" (387). We can expand the mode of inquiry further by defining texts as oral (usually transcriptions), written, or visual communication. For example, in "Close Vertical Transcription in Writing Center Training and Research," Magdalena Gilewicz and Terese Thonus illustrate a new method, vertical transcription of tutorials, that "goes beyond representing the essential syntax and vocabulary of an utterance to capturing most of the elements of the stream of speech" including "hesitations, repetitions, timed pauses, backchannels, overlaps and paralinguistic features" (46). Thus, Text Analysis can be used to answer such research questions as, "How directive are tutors, really?" or, How does gender affect talk in writing tutorials? (46), and so offers insights into verbal and nonverbal communication as well as writing.

For Writing Center Studies, Text Analysis may also be conducted to understand salient features of genres. Since writing centers serve students across disciplines, tutors may encounter unfamiliar documents such as white papers, grant proposals, and hybrid texts,

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including scientific posters that combine verbal and visual modes of communication. As Michael A. Pemberton reminds us in "Planning for Hypertexts in the Writing Center . . . or Not," we live in "an era when new literary genres and new forms of communication emerge on, seemingly, a weekly basis. . . . As a result, writing centers may soon find themselves conferencing with students about hypertexts in progress, confronting not only unfamiliar textual landscapes but also challenging problems in document design" (9, 10). Although Composition Studies, in its attempt to distance itself from practice (North 367), has generally moved away from Text Analysis with its emphasis on product (Bereiter 10), the text remains central to the writing center community's interests, particularly in matters of genre and linguistic diversity. One-on-one conferences are "trialogues," Donald Murray reminds us, with the writer, the tutor, and the text each having a voice (150). Text Analysis can help us decode what the text is saying and what is being said about the text. The writing center community has much to learn from Text Analysis of genres such as Robert M. Brown's study to identify features of successful personal statements for admission to graduate schools in clinical psychology.

Contextual Inquiry — Case Studies and Ethnographies: Contextual Inquiry, whether as Case Study Inquiry or Ethnographic Inquiry, contributes much to knowledge-making in Writing Center Studies. Through these descriptive methodologies, the researcher identifies and investigates the myriad of variables inherent in writing center work. For example, Contextual Inquiry may study the individual identities of writers and tutors or focus on the relationships among them. The methodology may concentrate on the dynamics of a single center or seek to understand a center's place and role within an educational institution, a community, or even cyberspace. Contextual Inquiry is especially appropriate in new situations where it can help shape hypotheses. As Katherine Schultz observes, descriptive research is "particularly suited to capturing the new directions that literacy, technology, and learning are moving in our new digital age" (369). The results of Contextual Inquiry, both in case studies and ethnographies, come "from the insiders' perspective, which is derived through inductive research and reported through nuanced, textured description" (Schultz 361).

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Although they share similar goals, outcomes, and epistemological values, Case Study Inquiry and Ethnographic Inquiry are distinct methodologies employing different methods of data collection and analysis. Neal Lerner in "Insider as Outsider: Participant Observation as Writing Center Research" and Mary Sue MacNealy in *Strategies for Empirical Research in Writing* offer especially useful discussions of such methods. In general, Case Study Inquiry focuses on a small number of selected subjects (usually tutors, writers, or their interactions) over a brief time, weeks or a semester typically. In Case Study Inquiry, the researcher may play a somewhat detached role, conducting interviews or analyzing videos. In contrast, Ethnographic Inquiry attends to the whole environment with researchers observing, participating in, and interpreting data from multiple sources over an extended time, often a year or more. The key difference between the methodologies is not simply scope, however, as MacNealy explains: "an ethnography should not be looked at as simply an extended case study; the key difference is not amount of time spent on the research nor size of the group being investigated, but the focus on the inter-relationship of elements in a defined unit" (214). Thus, by way of more substantially layered data collection, the ethnography arrives at deeper levels of complexity in interpretation than does the case study.

Since Ethnographic Inquiries are labor and time intensive, they tend to be the focus of funded research or dissertations, such as Anne DiPardo's *A Kind of Passport: A Basic Writing Adjunct Program and the Challenge of Student Diversity,* in which the writing center community learned about Fannie and how her relationship with her tutor was complicated by cross-cultural misunderstandings and shifts in conferencing pedagogy. Other notable ethnographic dissertations exploring writing center work include James H. Bell's "Tutoring in a Writing Center," Joyce N. Magnotto's "The Construction of College Writing in a Cross-Disciplinary Community College Writing Center: An Analysis of Student, Tutor, and Faculty Representations," and Barbara S. Roswell's "The Tutor's Audience is Always a Fiction: The Construction of Authority in Writing Center Conferences."

Strong examples of Case Study Inquiry are, ironically, difficult to locate among writing center publications. While researchers often

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cast their work as "case studies" in article titles, abstracts, and texts, the studies themselves do not always clearly reflect the methodology. Accordingly, the designation "case study" is sometimes (mis)applied to pure description, ranging from status-type reports on specific writing centers (the services they offer, their physical locations, their funding and administrative allocations, and so forth) to depictions of a particular person or activity (such as a single tutorial session or an incident that provoked subsequent research of other types). MacNealy cautions that a case study should not be equated with "a retrospective or anecdotal report on some procedure or event"; rather, "The value of a case study depends on good design. . . . The difference is preplanning" (196). One model of a well-designed case study is Amber M. Buck's report, "The Invisible Interface: MS Word in the Writing Center," which explores computer-based tutoring sessions involving an individual tutor. Other strong case studies branch out to incorporate additional methodologies; accordingly we discuss them within the context of methodological pluralism, in a later section.

Experimental Inquiry—True and Quasi-Experiments: Although Experimental Inquiry is also data-based Empirical Inquiry, it contrasts sharply with Descriptive Inquiry. Experimental researchers test hypotheses by controlling variables in a context and administering a treatment to measure their effects using statistical analyses. The strength of the design and the results of the experiment are judged by standards of replicability, reliability, and validity. The Experimental methodologies in our taxonomy are True Experiments (in which subjects are randomly assigned to a treatment or a control group, allowing the researcher to assume that the groups do not differ except by chance) and Quasi-Experiments (in which intact groups are studied and measurements are taken before a treatment begins, ensuring the groups start at the same level on relevant variables, such as GPA). The ability to assume that initially groups do not differ (either through randomizations or pretesting) is what lets researchers generalize the results to other populations in similar contexts. Experimental methodologies were widely accepted when Composition Studies emerged as a field. They were also the most frequent type of writing center research from 1910 to 1940 (Lerner,

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"Seeking" 56). Yet, by the early 1980s, a positivistic view and related experimental research had fallen out of favor as a methodology for understanding how students learn to write. Even today, because of its scientific traditions—detached observer, hypothesis-driven design, control of context and variables, reliance on statistical analyses— Experimental Inquiry is seldom used in writing center research where interaction tends to be one-on-one and the environment is more random than controlled.

Given the dearth of Experimental Inquiry in writing center work in recent years, why have we included it in the taxonomy? One answer is its role in program assessment.[2] Schultz observes that, "Despite significant advances in writing research from qualitative studies, there is a growing movement to identify outcomes-based scientific research as the only valid methodology for research in education" (358). While this movement lacks wide-spread support in writing center circles where directors often evaluate their programs using a mixed-method approach,[3] the value of experimental studies should not be dismissed. If we want to ask research questions with causal implications—such as, Do writing tutors embedded in composition classrooms improve student writing?—and to answer them with the kind of evidence that many administrators expect and understand (especially those administrators outside of the humanities to whom writing center directors often report), we will need to conduct True or Quasi-Experiments. If we do not, David Russell warns, we risk losing "control over our teaching and curriculum" in part because commercial enterprises are much better at demonstrating their outcomes (92). In the end, Russell claims, "it is systematic, data-based research that carries weight in the sorts of policy discussions that most affect WPAs and WCDs" (104). That the writing center community seldom conducts such studies may say more about our lack of training as quantitative researchers than the value of such studies.

A familiar experimental study in writing center research is Lerner's "Counting Beans and Making Beans Count" and his brutally honest reflective critique four year later, "Choosing Beans Wisely." To learn if students who use the writing center get better grades (whether on individual papers or in classes) than students who do

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not use the writing center, Lerner conducted a quasi-experiment with use of the writing center as the treatment and verbal SAT scores to determine if writing center users and non-users were equal in verbal abilities at the beginning of the semester. What he discovered was that "students with the weakest starting skills (according to their SAT verbal scores) came to the Writing Center most often and benefited the most" ("Counting" 3). Since other studies had shown that first-year students with higher GPAs tend not to withdraw, Lerner concluded that students with low SAT verbal scores who got help in his writing center were more likely to graduate. In the follow-up article, Lerner confesses that his "study was flawed, both statistically and logically" and offers a "cautionary tale" ("Choosing" 1). His prior assumption that "students with lower SAT verbal scores [would] do more poorly in Expository Writing than those with higher scores" proved, upon further correlations of SAT scores and course grades, to be statistically false ("Choosing" 3). Two other underlying assumptions—that course grades represent writing ability and that grades earned are not dependent upon the course instructor—were also questionable; hence, the weak validity of his study made his findings suspect. Yet rather than reject the value of Experimental Inquiry for writing center research, Lerner argues

> for a research agenda—whether quantitative or qualitative—that examines effects with far more impact than course or paper grades. . . . Assessment should be tied to our values and theories, as well as to larger institutional goals as described in college or departmental strategic plans or mission statements. ("Choosing" 3, 4)

Methodological Pluralism in Writing Center Research

As evident in our discussion of the range of writing center research methodologies, our taxonomy promotes methodological pluralism, a concept that allows us to embrace diverse methodologies and their variety of underlying epistemologies. We also intend methodological pluralism to convey that researchers should not be limited to the traditional parameters of a single, discrete methodology. Rather, methodologies can usefully blend and blur as researchers employ multiple methods to create complex, substantial studies.[4] We agree

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with Guba and Lincoln that "Inquiry methodology can no longer be treated as a set of universally applicable rules or abstractions. Methodology is inevitably interwoven with and emerges from the nature of particular disciplines . . . and perspectives" (191-92). Accordingly, methodological pluralism enables a diverse community of researchers to be "opportunistic," to use their strengths, interests, and contexts to investigate a wide range of questions for various purposes (Kirsch, "Methodological" 252). As the work of writers and the contexts of writing centers are complex, so too are the methodologies by which we study them.

The usefulness of combining methodologies is evident in a variety of writing center studies. Steven Corbett's dissertation, "Rhetorics of Close Collaboration: Four Case Studies of Classroom-Based Writing Tutoring and One-to-One Conferencing," is an example of Case Study Inquiry that productively blends methodologies. During his investigations, Corbett combines case study and ethnographic methods with rhetorical, genre, and text analysis to create a rich interpretive narrative. Similarly, Kerri Stanley Jordan's dissertation, "Power and Empowerment in Writing Center Conferences," combines Case Study Inquiry and ethnographic methods with Text Analysis and Conceptual Inquiry to describe the complex power negotiations inherent in tutorial interactions. While both researchers conduct Case Study Inquiries, ethnographic methods offer additional layers of data and strategies for positioning the researchers within their respective contexts. Methods of analysis commonly used by other descriptive and conceptual methodologies enable the researchers to examine the data more systematically and to situate their studies within relevant conceptual work on writing center theory and practice.

While writing center researchers have long borrowed methodologies from other disciplines, the advantages of methodological pluralism are particularly evident in Grounded Theory, a relatively new approach to literacy studies that is often used to study social interactions. This interpretive methodology gathers experiential, theoretical, and empirical evidence to create a fuller understanding of the complexities of learning, doing, and teaching writing. In short, it encourages a blending of descriptive

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and theoretical analyses. A strong advocate of Grounded Theory
in literacy research, Joyce Magnotto Neff explains in "Capturing
Complexity: Using Grounded Theory to Study Writing Centers"
how the methodology "asks researchers, practitioners, and theorists
to combine their talents" (135). Qualitative data, collected over an
extended period, are subjected to three rounds of coding—open,
axial, and selective. Open coding is a planning heuristic of sorts,
a taking apart of the data to look for ways to "chunk events or
interactions or phenomena in the data" (Neff 135). Axial coding
maps connections among the data, putting them back together
by drawing new connections. Finally, selective coding helps the
researcher to locate a "core category" and place the other categories
in relationship to it (Neff 139). In a narrative report illustrated with
visuals and matrices, the researcher "explicates the story line of
the core category by further validating causal conditions, context,
intervening conditions, interactions, and consequences surrounding
the phenomenon" to establish a "grounded theory about a particular
event, process, or social practice" (Neff 139). Throughout the recursive,
collaborative process, the participants in the study provide a check-
and-balance system as they respond to how the researcher represents
a phenomenon and how the team renegotiates the meaning of the
emerging knowledge.

Neff, using Grounded Theory in a study of her own writing
center, asks, "How do students and faculty-tutors [from different
disciplines] represent writing in their writing center discourse?
What are the implications of their representations for writing across
the curriculum?" (143). During her yearlong study, she gathered
various forms of evidence from students and faculty-tutors which
she analyzed through various coding methods, interpreting and
reinterpreting data as the year progressed. In the end, she learned
that students did not represent themselves as writers during tutorials
nor did their teachers view students in that role in their assignment
sheets or evaluative comments. She also identified as teachable
moments those times in tutorials when the student and the faculty-
tutor realize "that the other holds different assumptions about
writing and therefore represents writing differently," a breakthrough
she calls the "aha" moment (145). For those who have the time,

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Neff sees great potential for Grounded Theory in writing center research for several reasons, including the synergistic connections forged between the work of practitioners and researchers, the value of collaborative research teams, and the advantages of multiple methodologies and mixed methods for "multiple payoffs . . . and multiple research reports" for different audiences (144).

Some writing center researchers are employing another methodological blending, New Literacy Studies (NLS), because of a growing interest in all types of literacy. Schultz defends the choice of the word "literacy" rather than "writing" as a way of stressing "the embedded nature of writing as social practices, as well as the interconnections between writing, reading, and talk" (366). Researchers who employ the methods of NLS (narratives, case studies, ethnographies, and interviews, for example) are particularly interested in "describ[ing] ways of acting and behaving that reflect power positions and structures" (Schultz 366). Grimm, a strong advocate for NLS in writing center work, argues that

> With an ideological perspective on literacy, a writing center researcher pays attention to much more than words on a page. Instead, the scope of attention is broadened to include not only the text but also the conceptions, attitudes, and belief systems of the individuals involved in the literate activity. . . . [NLS] insists on paying attention to linguistic and cultural diversity. . . . It encourages us to look at relationships, identities, cultural understandings, and more. ("In the Spirit" 46)

Grimm calls NLS a "discover approach to research rather than a prove-it approach" (46) and identifies several principles: "a strong sense of advocacy" for multiple literacies, an insistence that "all texts be treated equally," the view of "education as process of transformation rather than an assimilation," and the importance of social context to literacy practices (52-53). In some ways, NLS is a hybrid methodology, a cross between Contextual Inquiry of social practices and Conceptual Inquiry of social theories. As Brian Street, a leading figure in NLS, puts it, "A key issue, at both a methodological and an empirical level, then, is how we can characterize the shift from observing literacy events to conceptualizing literacy practices" (79). Currently, few if any writing center studies have been conducted

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using NLS methodology; however, NLS could emerge as a distinct type of methodological pluralism as writing center research evolves.

Finally, we offer an explanation of what we have not included in our taxonomy. The prediction and classification studies in Lauer and Asher's empirical taxonomy are not applicable in a writing center context that welcomes all writers; however, in times of tight budgets, directors may want to know if students with particular classifications, writing skills, or demographics benefit from tutoring more than others. Also absent is meta-analysis, a review of the literature of sorts which uses statistical tests to integrate the findings of related studies to summarize the overall effects of a particular treatment. Until the quantitative results of more experimental studies in writing centers are reported, meta-analysis is not a viable methodology for writing center research. Nor do we see activity in writing center research that aligns with Bereiter and Scardamalia's Levels 4 (Process Description), 5 (Theory-embedded Experimentation), and 6 (Simulation). These levels focused on understanding cognitive processes of writing. Because writing center research is currently more interested in social than cognitive processes of writing, the writing center community has mostly abandoned these methodologies.

Likewise, we find no Formalists, as North describes them: researchers who use formal languages to build models, a methodology that seems better suited to mathematics or linguistics. The most widely known Formalist study in composition is that of Linda Flower and John R. Hayes whose research resulted in a model of cognitive processes in writing. While this model has influenced writing center pedagogy, writing center researchers have not developed a cognitive process model of tutoring, to offer a parallel. Yet in "Seeking Knowledge About Writing Centers in Numbers, Talk, and Archives," Lerner describes research questions and scenarios that he would like to see addressed. In a qualitative project which he calls "A Day in the Life of a Tutoring Session," he urges researchers to study the contexts of a single tutorial, including "a post-session interview with the tutor in which the tutor and researcher review the events of the session and do a 'stimulated recall' of the instructional moves the tutor made and why" and a "post-session interview with the student with a similar procedure but also some insight into why the student

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made the textual choices she did in the piece of writing she brought to the session" (74). So we may see a return to cognitive process methodologies after all. Inclusions, exclusions, the emergence of new methodologies, and the possibilities of old ones returning—the taxonomy presented here is certain to change over time.

Using the Taxonomy:
Questions, Positionality, and Intentionality

What becomes clear as we consider methodological pluralism is how critical it is when designing a study to articulate one's research agenda—the purpose, motivating questions, and the nature of the study's outcomes. The questions that Lerner poses for assessment projects are good ones to keep in mind for any kind of inquiry: "What do you want to know? Why do you want to know it? How will you go about investigating it? How will you tell if you've found it?" ("Choosing" 3). Answering them will help researchers determine the most fitting methodology and methods. For example, researchers seeking personal, experiential, dialectically tested "truth" or "earned insight" might opt for Practitioner Inquiry, while those aiming for potentially more generalizable natural or socially constructed "truth" might examine human behavior through Empirical Inquiry. Those seeking interpreted "truth" based on existing textual evidence rather than on observed or tested behavior might engage in Conceptual Inquiry. And for some multilayered research agendas, inquirers may undertake multi-methodological work to account for more of the social and contextual intricacies of writing center work. Every research journey involves decisions, tradeoffs, and compromises. What is important is that the researchers and the readers of research understand how and why a study was conducted as reported.

Endorsing methodological pluralism makes it more important than ever that researchers guard against overgeneralizing claims and readers refrain from interpreting results from different kinds of studies as cumulative knowledge. For example, researchers conducting Practitioner Inquiry overstate their findings if they suggest that knowledge from individual experience can be applied to all writers or all writing centers; likewise, researchers conducting

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Conceptual Inquiry ignore the limits of theoretical studies if they suggest best practices for writing center operations. Researchers should respect—even discuss—the limits of their methodologies when reporting their work; readers, in turn, must not expect every research study to offer practical applications for writing center work.

Distinctions among the three main categories of the taxonomy are determined in part by the positionality and intentionality of the researcher. Positionality is determined both by her physical location and by her critical lens. Those who engage in Practitioner Inquiry or Contextual Inquiry are usually physically active within the research arena as participants or participant observers, tutoring students or interacting with tutors, for example. They typically view research as shared meaning making. Those who conduct Conceptual Inquiries or Empirical Inquiries other than Contextual Inquiries tend to be further removed from the scene being studied. For example, MacNealy's term for Conceptual Inquiry is "library-based" research. And researchers conducting Empirical Inquiries (other than contextual studies) tend to focus more on interpreting data according to the dictates of the method used—statistical or linguistic interpretations, for instance. They consciously strive for objectivity. Thus, positionality is determined by how researchers (imagine some of them in writing centers, others in the library, and a few in controlled settings) interact with their collaborating participants/ textual data/subjects and whether they see themselves constructing or revealing knowledge.

Positionality alone, however, is not enough to distinguish among Practitioner Inquiry, Conceptual Inquiry, and Empirical Inquiry. Intentionality—the degree to which the researcher articulates a research question, identifies methods, and plans a study in advance—is also important. Those who conduct Empirical and Contextual inquiries do so with greater awareness of intentionality. They purposefully choose participants and settings, take meticulous field notes, and identify key texts and contexts. That is not to say that researchers conducting Empirical Inquiry or Contextual Inquiry do not sometimes have to adapt their designs or incorporate new texts during the course of their studies. Nor do we mean to suggest that those who conduct Practitioner Inquiry stumble on topics

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by accident or work entirely without plans. But if we have two researchers, both working within local contexts, both aware that their studies will not carry global implications, and both using narrative structure to report their insights, what will distinguish the inquiry of the practitioner from that of the ethnographer? The answer lies in the intentionality. The practitioner discovers his research question often by chance; the ethnographer has articulated her overriding question and planned her methods for gathering and analyzing data well in advance.

Revisualizing a Taxonomy of Methodologies in Writing Center Research

Johanek rightly surmises that "To examine research trends in any field is to study its processes of knowledge-making" (12). In our attempts to conceptualize how knowledge has been, is, and might be made in Writing Center Studies, the linear model evident in Figure 1 initially served our purposes well; we wanted to trace our roots in Composition Studies and to think systematically about distinctions among types of research methodologies. In completing our study, however, we have come to realize that a different visual may be in order: one that disrupts the hierarchy implicitly inherent in a top-down, left-right, linear model; one that recognizes the intellectual value of each methodology; and one that better emphasizes the epistemological terrain of methodological pluralism. Such a visual would better suggest that Practitioner Inquiry may stimulate Empirical Inquiry or Empirical Inquiry may influence Conceptual Inquiry or vice versa. And such a representation would support connections between theory and practice, practice and empirical studies, and empirical studies and theory.

To that end, we offer a new visual and its accompanying metaphor. We ask our readers to consider this article as a kind of Global Positioning System and the map below a representation of what our GPS has pinpointed thus far about research in Writing Center Studies. We have traced some key thoroughfares connecting already-recognized and well-populated locations. We leave our readers to explore and mark the alternate routes from one point to another—and the yet unmapped locations where routes, both old and new, might intersect.
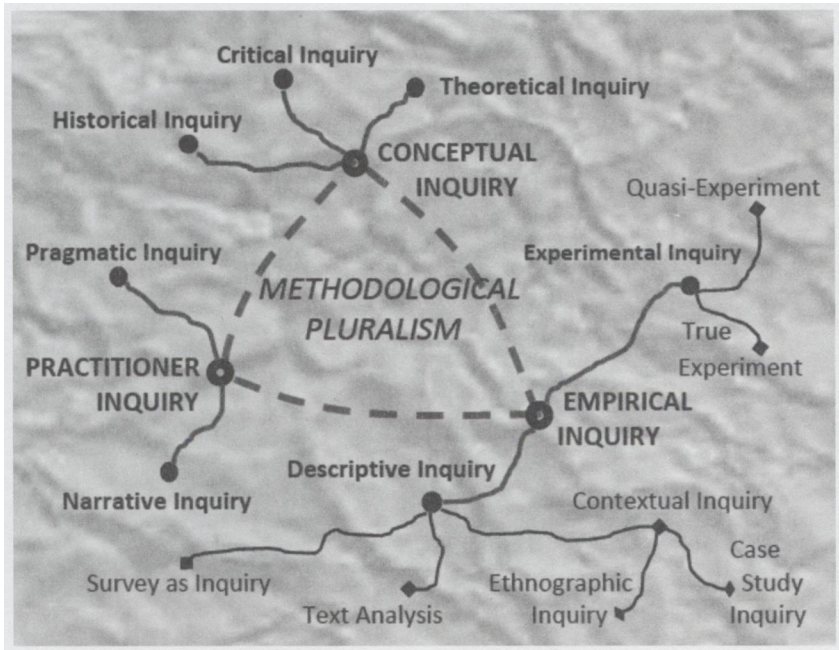
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Figure 2: The Terrain of Methodologies in Writing Center Research

Because of the range of methodologies available to writing center researchers, we feel the GPS is a particularly apt metaphor for our taxonomy. It is especially useful once a traveler has determined where he wants to go and is in search of a way to proceed. Of course, there is seldom only one route to a destination, and always there is the possibility of forging a new path. Our taxonomy, we hope, provides researchers with a way to consider these possibilities and to choose an investigative route that best suits their interests, needs, abilities, and resources. The GPS, however, is also useful to those who are not planning a trip; it can be used to pinpoint locations from where others have started and follow their routes. Accordingly, our taxonomy can help researchers clarify the methodological and epistemological groundings of various studies they encounter, helping them to become better at reading, analyzing, and critiquing research in our field, especially when research crosses methodological lines.

Because we maintain that all researchers should be clear about their methodologies and methods, we close by locating our study in the taxonomy. This article is essentially Theoretical Inquiry into

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writing center epistemology. As Lauer and Asher explain:

> The justification of a new theory is essentially a rhetorical act, an act of interpretation, an act of providing warrants, good reasons, of detailing the components of the theory under scrutiny, its properties, its part and their interrelationships, and the larger groups in which it exists. Justification demands reasons why this theory is sufficient to explain the majority of instances of the behavior, and proof that the theory is not fraught with serious objections. (5)

Our taxonomy is a theory about how the writing center community makes knowledge. We offer it because, like Gillam, we believe the "scarcity of explicit talk about research" (3) impedes the writing center community's understanding of its research agenda. Our practice *and* our research define who we are as a community. We hope the taxonomy also helps us reflect on who we might become as researchers. Let's continue the conversation.

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NOTES

1. An earlier project as Critical Inquirers led us to write this article. For a chapter in *The Changing of Knowledge in Composition: Contemporary Perspectives,* a retrospective on North's *The Making of Knowledge in Composition (MKC)* edited by Lance Massey and Richard C. Gebhardt, we analyzed articles that have earned their authors "Outstanding Scholarship Awards" from the IWCA. We wanted to know, Through what modes of inquiry has writing center knowledge expanded since the publication of *MKC* in 1987? How closely have authors followed North's outlines for conducting inquiry and to what ends? What new modes of inquiry have emerged? What do our findings suggest about knowledge-making in the writing center community? What we learned motivated us to construct this taxonomy.

2. We do not mean to imply that program assessment should be limited to experimental studies. Writing center directors use many different assessment methods effectively: surveys, interviews, focus groups, case studies, numerical data, and demographics of users, to name a few. But we should not overlook the possibility of experimental studies when appropriate.

3. For example, Emily Donnelli and Kristen Garrison in "Tapping Multiple Voices in Writing Center Assessment" use Johanek's contextualist paradigm and James H. Bell's "evaluation orientations" (par. 8) to gather qualitative and quantitative data to gauge the impact of the writing center at the University of Kansas.

4. Because methods tend to be shared among methodologies and few methods are exclusive to a single methodology, most studies employ mixed or multiple methods. Methods are tools; sometimes it takes more than a hammer to do the job well.

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