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Editor's Introduction : A Continuing Conversation About Methodological Problems and Prospects

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Editor's Introduction

A Continuing Conversation About Methodological Problems and Prospects

The articles featured in this special issue of *Written Communication* focus on key methodological problems and prospects for the study of writing. Given the scope of writing as an object of study, this is no minor undertaking; but it is an important one, not only because methods provide a means by which to conduct reasoned inquiry, but also because discussions about methodology provide writing researchers with a forum for examining the problems that these methods are designed, and deployed, to address. Indeed, the authors in this special issue illustrate how diverse yet complementary methodologies can be brought to bear on common problems within the broader field of writing studies.

Charles Bazerman argues that “theories of the middle range” (a concept he draws from Robert Merton) provide fruitful ways to deal with problems of formulating research questions and identifying research sites. Peter Smagorinsky addresses another, often problematic, issue for writing researchers: specifying and elaborating methods in a way that makes them trustworthy—and replicable—for readers and for other researchers. In their articles, Theresa Lillis and Tiane Donahue each interrogate and extend specific methodologies—ethnography and text analysis, respectively—and illustrate, via their own previously published research, the promise of these methods for deeper, more complex understandings of the dynamics of academic writing. Submitted in response to a call for papers for this special issue, each article underwent WC’s standard review process and benefited greatly from reviews by Editorial Board members of the journal and selected outside reviewers.

In the first and final articles, Bazerman and Smagorinsky provide bookends for this issue of WC as they conceptually analyze and provide useful guidance for two complementary aspects of research: the formulation of problems and the articulation of methods. Bazerman, working primarily from within an activity theoretic framework, finds parallels between the current state of writing research and Merton’s assessment of the project of sociology in the mid-twentieth century. In both cases, Bazerman suggests, there is a need for rapprochement between “grand theorizing,” on the one hand, and fine-grained,

detail-rich cases unmoored from theoretical payoff, on the other. Drawing upon Merton's call for theories of a middle range as well as his work on problem finding in research practice, Bazerman explains how originating questions, specifying questions, focused research episodes, and strategic research sites help researchers negotiate the problematics of conducting (and reporting) case-specific and theoretically-rich research. Bazerman usefully grounds his discussion in examples from his own and others' historical research.

Smagorinsky's piece tackles another vexing problem for researchers, authors, and editors: the need for a clearly-articulated and well-reasoned discussion of methods in research reports. He makes a compelling case that the methods section can provide a "conceptual epicenter" both for the conduct and for the presentation of research. Drawing on his own experiences as editor, reviewer, publishing scholar, and mentor to graduate students, Smagorinsky articulates why methods matter and provides straightforward and clearly supported strategies for authors on the specifics of data collection, data reduction, and data analysis. His own analysis of the coding of qualitative data—the relation between theory and data, the nature of reliability and trust—is as provocative as it is persuasive. To my mind, these two pieces—Bazerman on the formulation of research problems and Smagorinsky on the use and presentation of method—should be required reading not only for authors and editors in writing studies, but for graduate students and instructors as well.

In their separate articles, Donahue and Lillis address the problematics of research in a different way: by articulating both the limitations and the promise of two established methods for the study of written communication—text analysis and ethnography, respectively. Lillis draws on the work of Jan Blommaert to discuss the limited value of understanding ethnography as method, the potential value of ethnography as methodology, and the powerful benefits of understanding ethnography as deep theorizing. She argues that "ethnography as deep theorizing" usefully problematizes the relationship between language and culture even as it makes epistemological and ontological underpinnings explicit. Such deep theorizing, Lillis suggests, can begin to bridge the gap between studies of text and context in academic writing research.

Donahue brings into dialog French functional linguistics and North American traditions of discourse analysis to argue that two key analytic moves—reprise modification and textual movement—can illuminate cultural difference as well as move beyond it. Donahue usefully reviews distinct but somewhat parallel traditions and studies in French and North American research on writing and presents results from studies of college students

which suggest a “discourse of negotiation” that may cross cultural contexts. The articles by Lillis and Donahue are of particular value for the way they explicitly articulate commonalities between European (textual ethnography in the U.K., functional linguistics in France) and North American approaches.

Working with the authors and preparing this issue for publication has been particularly gratifying for the editorial team. Although *WC* has not previously published an issue devoted exclusively to methodology, one of the hallmarks of the journal (and one of the points of pride for editors) has been the range of methods deployed in the studies published and the expert handling of those methods by authors. Editorial Board members and other reviewers tend to be rigorous methodologists who often challenge authors with pointed questions about method; the methodological sophistication of reviewers has sharpened my own thinking about, and implementation of, methodology. In many ways, this special issue is the culmination of important conversations—in print, via e-mail, and in person—in which members of the *Written Communication* community have engaged over the last few years. It is our hope—and that of the authors and reviewers who have contributed to the articles here—that this issue will serve to further, and to further enrich, these vital conversations.

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