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I Know I Shouldn't Generalize, but...:

A Rhetorical Critique of Ethnography in Composition Studies

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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***I Know I Shouldn't Generalize, but...:*
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ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at Stephen North's 1987 claim of the limits of ethnography in composition research and looks at modern, published research studies to see how they have heeded North's warnings.

In 1987 Stephen North claimed that the future of ethnographic methodology in composition research was doomed unless those who would adopt this qualitative technique understood its limitations. North argued that each ethnography is only valuable as an individual study, that individual studies are not cumulative towards some absolute and discoverable positivistic model of knowledge. This warning of the problem and limitations of modern qualitative ethnography was issued over 2 decades ago; how have we done? Does the modern composition researcher who uses ethnographic methodology heed North's warning not to generalize, or do they just tip their hat at North and do it anyway? But regardless of North's dire predictions and warnings, it is apparent that ethnography as a research methodology (in its many disputed forms) is here to stay in composition studies.

This thesis provides a sample of research ethnographies published since North's 1987 warning and looks at the methodologies, narrative style, and theoretical conclusions used by some current researchers. By using a close rhetorical analysis which compares the language choices and theoretical positions of those well-received studies against the idea of the non-cumulative nature of ethnographic study, I will contrast what modern researchers say they will do versus what is presented within their published work.

Using North's and others' claims on the limitations of generalizable knowledge and hypotheses-testing fallacies of ethnographic methodology for research in composition studies,

this thesis first defines the research questions, offers a definition of methodological terms in context of rhetoric and composition research, offers a background of critique, and applies this critique to a sample of post-North published dissertations and monographs.

Introduction

In 1987 Stephen North claimed that the future of ethnographic methodology in composition research was doomed unless those who would adopt this qualitative technique understood its limitations.¹ North argued that each ethnography is valuable only as an individual study and that the unique variables of each study prevent any attempt to accumulate multiple ethnographies in order to build a positivistic model of knowledge. Simply put, a researcher cannot study a single individual or a group of individuals and then generalize the observations; what “works” or “explains” this one student or this one class cannot be generalized to a larger body. This critique of ethnography was issued over two decades ago and now this study asks how we have done. When contemporary composition researchers use ethnographic methodology, do they heed North’s warning not to generalize, or do they just tip their hat at North and do it anyway?

Many compositionists, such as Keith Rhodes, Robert Brooke, Gwen Gorzelsky, Wendy Bishop, and Ralph Cintron, are continuing the critique of ethnography or are at least calling for a postmodern definition of ethnography as a “moment [which] is not replicable ... since each investigation is created through the interactions of research design *and* researcher *and* community” (Bishop 109, emphasis original). Even though this criticism is appropriate for a field that is enveloped in self-reflective and critical thought, many composition researchers have taken to ethnography in full force with varying degrees of success. Even while accepting the premise that ethnographic findings “are made in the context of, and thus tied to, the specific phenomena [observed]” (North 278), some of today’s composition researchers seem to cross that line between

¹ In her recent publication with Brian Street, *On Ethnography*, the esteemed ethnographer Shirley Brice Heath feels that ethnography should be distanced from qualitative research. As she tries to accomplish the “core research values” of “*reliability, replicability, and validity*” (28) more commonly associated with quantitative research, Brice and Street lay out a complex blend of approaches and tools to reject such dialectic. As she notes, while intriguing and provocative, this separation of ethnography from qualitative research is not a universal (or even standard) concept (29, 45).

participating and observing a unique, individual, phenomenological experience to generalizing and hypothesizing for multiple communities well beyond what Clifford Geertz and then Stephen North call the “imaginative universe” that the study was conducted within. What is true for a

The tendency to generalize and to try and build objective knowledge is exactly what North (and now others) warns is *at least* the misapplication of the term ethnography and *at worst* an academic, pedagogical, and epistemological fallacy.

“one-time, one-place occurrence” (North 278) is not necessarily true for communities beyond. When a composition researcher observes one student or one classroom, that observation comes from that community and should not be applied to all college freshmen, for example.

And it is not only the tendency to generalize that should be reviewed in modern qualitative

composition research, but also the goal of the ethnography to begin with. In 1987 North noted a difference between “the phenomenological versus positivist orientation” that becomes evident in many ethnographic studies (279). Even though ethnography is often defined as “hypothesis-generating” (Merriam, *Case Study Research* 3) and a *descriptive* but not *proscriptive* process (Heath 14), commonly understood as phenomenological, there can be a tendency to allow theory to guide and restrict the research and its observations in pursuit of the “Truth” or the “Perfect Theory.” As this study acknowledges, the tension between these two radically oppositional ideas continues to today. When conducting research, are contemporary qualitative researchers in composition following traditional social-science methodologies of hypothesis testing or the more humanistic and cultural relativistic mode of hypothesis generating? Do they observe a community to develop (and possibly test) theory unique to that community, or do the observations simply match a preexisting set of conditions of an existent theory? Is the schema that drives the research “I see, therefore I theorize” or is it “I theorize, therefore I see (my theory)?”

The questions of generalizing and hypothesis testing are inevitably intertwined; the application of theory (theory of knowledge, theory of pedagogy, theory of community) to a

qualitative study can lead to a positivistic statement of generalized and objective knowledge. This is a risk, “despite the fact that both the possibility and desirability of objectivity have been thoroughly discredited in recent and ongoing research in critical anthropology, critical legal studies, postcolonial theory, feminist theory, queer theory, and so on” (Barnard 95). The tendency to generalize and to try to build objective knowledge is exactly what North (and now others) warns is *at least* the misapplication of the term ethnography and *at worst* an academic, pedagogical, and epistemological fallacy. This study looks at how four contemporary composition scholars navigate this potentially treacherous divide; can they share and contribute knowledge to the field of composition but construct it in a way that will comply with institutional pressure for quantitative data? Is successful ethnography a pass/fail or is there a new rhetoric and alternative discourse for contemporary composition researchers?

Background and Context

In 1987, as the field of rhetoric and composition studies was making a shift to academic legitimacy through the increase of research and theory, Stephen North published *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field*. In this examination of composition studies², North describes a triad of disciplinary knowledge-makers that have the most promise for substantiating the field. North describes the practitioners, the scholars, and the researchers, with the ethnographers holding a unique transitory position somewhere between the researchers and the practitioners. North is not optimistic about the future of ethnography in composition. Among his multilayered warnings of ethnographic research, one of the most poignant and specific concerns is about the “limits as knowledge” of ethnography due to the “insularity of investigation: the difficulty of somehow extending the findings of an investigation in any one community to any other” (278). Also in 1987, Robert Brooke used the sociological concept of “underlife” to explain “behaviors which undercut the roles expected of participants in a situation” (141). This concept denies a naïve view of classroom, dorm room, or single-site research as a community from which positivistic data can be gathered, and speaks to the complexity of the motivations and understandings of research participants. A decade later, Kay Losey reflected on her own epiphany of research: “the classroom is not a single community nor does it have a single culture” (86). The common conclusion of these theorists, practitioners, and researchers is that ethnographic study may have value, but that value is context-specific and therefore cannot produce generalizable knowledge that can be extended to other contexts. Losey admits her own mistakes in assumption, saying:

² North chooses to capitalize the word “Composition” which is a practice I do not follow. For North, perhaps this proper-noun emphasis is appropriate to the title and examination of an “emerging field.”

I assumed that indeed the classroom had a single culture. Instead, I came to recognize that the classroom was composed of a number of smaller communities, each with its own culture. Obviously, there were teachers and students. There were also men and women. There were Mexican-Americans, Anglo-Americans, Portuguese-Americans, Asian-Americans. Some people spoke English as their first language. For others, English was their second or third language. The classroom I studied had a number of different communities with a number of different perspectives. (86)

As a result of this non-generalizable knowledge that each specific ethnography produces, North also concludes that ethnography can produce hypotheses only “in terms of the rules for meaning-making that operate there [in that individual study]” (285). Geoffrey Cross summarizes North’s position as stating that “[c]omposition ethnographers thus should not enter field research with hypotheses or try to come away with grounded hypotheses to be developed by the same or other means of research” (121). For a variety of reasons that have been supported by each of the methodological approaches, ethnographic research cannot produce generalizable knowledge and should only generate hypotheses (that according to North will only work in that individual context). As a result, the ethnographer should write “this is what I observed” and not “this is what you should do as a result.”

Regardless of North’s dire predictions and warnings, it is apparent that ethnography as a research methodology (in its many disputed forms) is here to stay in composition studies.

In the 20 years since North first declared his position, ethnography has remained a popular research methodology within composition studies. In *The Making of Knowledge* (1987) North reported that only 2000 pages of books, articles, thesis, dissertations, and papers had been produced on the subject. In 1997, Kirklighter et al. used the ERIC and MLA databases to

determine that there was an increase to 5300 pages between 1987 and 1995 (viii). Using the same criteria, my research shows that between 1987 and 2009 there are now over 3500 *individual documents*. Using the ProQuest database, I found that from 1987 until 2009 there were 552 theses and/or dissertations using ethnographic methodology to explore composition or writing with over 225 of these in the more recent 2001-2009 timeframe. Regardless of North's dire predictions and warnings, it is apparent that ethnography as a research methodology (in its many disputed forms) is here to stay in composition studies.

The Value of Critical Analysis

Critical analysis by definition requires pointing, picking, and doubting. This is easy to misread and mistake for judgment and condemnation. I applaud the efforts of all of the authors, researchers, and practitioners represented in this analysis and indeed find much of their work useful and beneficial to my own profession and teaching. But it is precisely because of the value of the work of composition researchers that I am holding the bar so high. For as North said:

Practitioners need to defend themselves – to argue for the value of what they know, and how they come to know it. For that very reason, though, they need to be more methodologically self-conscious than any of the other communities: to know the limits of authority the other modes of inquiry can claim, on the one hand; but to know the limits of their own, as well, and work within them. In that direction, and not in any sort of methodological masquerade, lies the basis for a genuine credibility. (55)

So with all of these warnings and critiques and all of this research being done, I felt it was important to look at specific studies that have been published since 1987 to see how they measure against a postmodern understanding of the limitations and value of ethnographic methodology. To examine the rhetorical choices made by the authors adds importantly to understanding the context for those choices and allows the reader to evaluate the contribution of knowledge more thoroughly.

Research Methodology

Using North's and others' claims on the limitations of generalizable knowledge and hypotheses-testing fallacies of ethnographic methodology for research in composition studies, this thesis first defines the research questions, provides a definition of methodological terms in context of rhetoric and composition research, offers a background of critique, and applies this critique to a sample of post-North published dissertations and monographs.

Finding good ethnographic studies is a challenge, regardless of their popularity as a research methodology. So much has been written, ala North, about the critique of how (and if) ethnography should be done in composition studies, that traditional search engines return more critique than substance. MLA bibliography, CompPile, Google Scholar, Rebecca Moore Howard's bibliography list, and so many other forms of searches all produce similar results. Finally to choose studies for this thesis, I turned to the WPA listserv to ask my peers and the professional community of compositionists for a recommended list of top ethnographies done in the field within the last ten years, and then I sorted through the recommendations before finally settling on my top four choices represented here.

This study will look at 4 of the most-recommended research ethnographies published since North's 1987 warning. By using a close rhetorical analysis which compares the language choices and theoretical positions of those well-received studies against the idea of the non-cumulative nature of ethnographic study, I will contrast what modern researchers say they will do versus what is presented within their published work.

Definition of Terms

The field of composition research works with theory, research methodology, and practical applications of ethnography, so a critique of this field must first contextualize many of the terms that these disparate but related areas of knowledge use and work towards defining how they will be used within the study. *Qualitative research* is a term that, like many now used in composition research, is largely borrowed from the field of critical anthropology. Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, and George E. Marcus are some of the most important characters both for a traditional definition of this term as well as how it might be applied to postmodern research, and Stephen North listed the various synonyms for this type of research methodology as it commonly applied to composition research: “naturalistic, holistic, descriptive, qualitative, phenomenological, hypothesis generating (as opposed to hypothesis testing), participant-

**The 19th century
colonialist/anthropologist is a fitting
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observation, micro-ethnographic” (273).

As defined, within the body of qualitative research one of the most celebrated (and critiqued) methods is *ethnography*. Geoffrey Cross defines its use in composition studies simply as “the firsthand observation, documentation, and interpretation of

composing activities and their correlate meaning in natural settings, such as classrooms and governmental offices” (118). North complains that the way in which the term ethnography has been applied by composition researchers makes it difficult to define; in fact that lack of methodological clarity is much of the basis of his argument for the limitations of ethnography. He does describe the process, as he sees it, of achieving ethnographic knowledge as “Ethnographic investigators go into a community, observe (by whatever variety of means) what happens there,

and then produce an account—which they will try to verify or ground in a variety of ways—of what happened” (277). Simply put, according to North, “Ethnographic inquiry produces stories, fictions” (277). Ralph Cintron also gives composition’s use of ethnography an amorphous, but promising, definition as a “puzzling and enchanting” methodology that is “puzzling because its methodology is difficult to standardize and enchanting because the profession has sensed ethnography’s potential for delivering new kinds of data and for providing answers that are otherwise elusive” (372).

Ralph Cintron’s article “Wearing a Pith Helmet at a Sly Angle: or Can Writing Researchers Do Ethnography in a Postmodern Era?” uses a 19th-century colonialist/anthropologist as a metaphor for the modern composition studies researcher who goes into the “field” of college classrooms and dormitories to seek out, document, and understand the elusive “beast” of the undergraduate. This is a fitting allusion to the positivistic knowledge that is often potential and always controversial in ethnography. *Positivistic knowledge* as it applies to composition research suggests a more scientific view of absolute and definable outcomes that can be “discovered” compared to the more phenomenological approach of isolated and contextual outcomes that are “constructed,” common in a more post-positivistic approach. Although ethnographers would tend to be categorized as postpositivists, as Kristi Yager states, “scientism does -- despite so much of our criticism -- still structure much of composition’s research scholarship” (42).

Post-positivistic knowledge can also be seen in relation to *postmodernism*; knowledge is no longer clearly containable in a single philosophy; it is always contextual, and the tools of examination themselves are to be constantly critiqued and examined. Postmodernism in composition studies can be defined as new “understandings of subjectivity, truth, and epistemology” (Barnard 95) that often conflict with an administrative and academic push towards standardization and assessment found on many university campuses. This focus on “[p]rescriptive standards, standardized testing, common syllabi, assessment, and outcomes [that can] become more important than ideas” (95) may pressure well-intentioned composition researchers to do

research on a limited scope to test previously established (and published) theories and then, at the risk of negating North's warning, generalize that knowledge in order to publish.³ With a nod to postmodernism, Ilene Crawford calls ethnographic research "timely work" whereby the conditions observed are specific and are "constantly being produced by a set of global and local circumstances for specific and finite moments in time" (13).

When the data gained from such a finite moment in time is misappropriated to represent other communities beyond that specific moment, the term *generalizable knowledge* can be used. North addresses this also as *accumulative knowledge* and he compares the value of a clinical (and therefore positivistic) research canon to the non-accumulative nature of ethnography. North sees a clinical canon of knowledge forming first through a series of individual research stories, and then by a connecting of these individual stories to form a paradigmatic truth. From a positivistic position, knowledge is discoverable, absolute, and verifiable. Therefore in an ethnographic study, once this knowledge has been discovered by way of testing a theory or hypothesis successfully, this knowledge can be generalized to apply to a larger public; generalizable knowledge becomes a paradigm. But qualitative research and the narratological approach and thick description of ethnography often resist and run counter to such a paradigmatic form of knowledge-making. Even though noted ethnographer Shirley Brice Heath disputes the restrictions of ethnography as qualitative research, she still recognizes "the accepted view that all ethnographic research is inherently interpretive, subjective, and partial" (45); these are hardly the qualities of generalizable knowledge. North puts it more bluntly: "With no single, paradigmatic reality to close in on, the phenomenologically-based Ethnographers [can only collect] multiple versions of what is *held* to be real by the people they investigate" (279), and thus we have a definition of ethnography as non-accumulative, non-generalizable knowledge.

³ Barnard's article in *Composition Studies* makes this point more succinctly by suggesting that hypocrisy exists due to a lag between research/theory and practice/pedagogy that is largely a result of institutional pressure. See also Kristi Yager's article where she discusses the pressure to composition studies as a result of the "cultural capital of positivistic empiricism" (42).

Keith Rhodes, among others, critiques the misapplication of ethnographic methodology in composition studies for its tendency to “become traditional social science, in which studies do not generate hypotheses but merely test them” (27). This can be a problem not only due to the lack of the potential to create new (and discipline and situational specific) theory, but also because it is in opposition to the common definition of ethnography as “hypothesis-generating” (Merriam 3). Composition ethnographies that are *hypothesis-testing* risk biasing the researcher into taking note of or including only those data that support the existing theory. This is intricately tied to the positivistic and dated colonialist idea of the research study participant who must measure up to a standard imposed by non-specific contextual theory, or as Rhodes puts it:

The inquiry becomes less a question of ‘What is the cultural situation of writing education’ and more a question of ‘What is lacking in these students?’ No Matter how benevolently this last question is framed, it reeks of early anthropology that looked at the ‘deficiencies’ of foreign cultures paternally. (28)

Largely as a result of the postmodern and post-positivistic movements, one alternative methodology to traditional ethnography is “an ethnographically-oriented research which forwards a phenomenological epistemology and is rooted in a social constructivist tradition” (Yager 38). The *autoethnography* is one term now used for this self-aware researcher who combines personal narrative with objective description. This genre of ethnography posits that composition ethnographers have “rhetorical awareness”; they “understand as writers the subjective, rhetorical nature of the act of writing in the production of ethnographic work” (Brooke 12) and therefore write with an attempt of full-disclosure about context of the researcher, the participants, the existence (or not) of pre-study theory, the methodology used, the critique of the participants, and anything else that could be seen as othering the subjects or biasing the data. Keith Rhodes suggests a new term for this new “messy genre” of amalgamated ethnography: *psychography*, where “postmodernism meets both the continuing need to hear ‘expressivist’ individual stories and the ‘positivistic’ need to validate hypotheses” (33).

I will use the above vocabulary in an attempt to rhetorically analyze the subject studies I have chosen and to measure them against Stephen North's paradigmatic 1987 warning of the limitations of ethnography. Over 20 years and countless studies and critiques later, my question is do we have any better idea of what ethnography is in the field of composition research?

A Study of One

Anne Beaufort's *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction*, published in 2007, presents an argument for why and how to change the writing curriculum for freshmen composition as well as throughout other college-level venues such as writing-in-the-discipline or writing-across-the-curriculum programs, teaching training programs, and writing center approaches to writing. Beaufort's argument is that we have all heard of the "Dick or Jane can't write" quandary and that from her experience as a practitioner, a teaching mentor, a writing program administrator, and a researcher, she has an opinion on why this is so. She then uses a longitudinal study to illustrate this opinion.

Beaufort primarily picks two principal reasons why writing instruction is not working, or as she defines the question, "why graduates of freshmen writing cannot produce acceptable written documents in other contexts" (6). The first reason is a problem with institutional isolation, a critique Beaufort relates to the theories of "social constructionism and activity theory and the related perspectives of literacy studies, genre theory, and critical theory" (9). In essence the problem, as she defines it, is that freshmen writing courses are not related to any other field of study, that this creates a false social context (and audience) for the student, and that only creates a student writer who is "writing to produce writing" (Dias qtd. in Beaufort 9). The term Beaufort begins to use here and builds upon through the text is "discourse community" (10), and she claims that students are not learning that concept at all, much less learning to apply and navigate it.

The second major problem with the university writing curriculum, according to this study, is a lack of, or often a negative, transfer of learning skills (11). Beaufort feels that freshmen writing courses are often taught with a set of general writing skills that (mis)leads

student writers into thinking that what they learn about writing in freshmen comp will immediately transfer and work in other classes. This results in a process where “The student must learn, through failed attempts at such transfer of supposed ‘general’ writing skills, how to adapt to the standards and purposes for writing in new discourse communities” (11).

Beaufort lays out this theory of why university writing instruction does not work in its current form over a longitudinal (six-year) case study of a single student writer followed from his freshmen writing courses to his double-major courses and into his professional engineering career, or as she puts it, “This book has two stories to tell: the story of Tim’s [the participant] somewhat limited growth as a writer...and second, more argument than story, a case for a re-conceptualization of writing instruction at the post-secondary level” (5). To be clear, this study contains one story and one argument (although which came first is unclear). The author then draws upon this “blended genre of both ethnography and argument” (6) to address multiple audiences: those that lament about Dick and Jane, such as business leaders and professors in disciplines outside of composition; those practitioners within the field of composition, who she hopes to provide “additional empirical work and pragmatic solutions” for (6); and finally for theorists and critics who, in Beaufort’s opinion, have not really been looking at this problem (or been listening to the practitioners who have to deal with it) all in an effort to “contribute to theory-building regarding developmental processes of writers [and to] develop a composite of developmental processes at the university level” to help curriculum and assessment standards (26).

The two stories that Beaufort tells are given to the reader in the form of chapters that discuss the dilemma of freshmen writing (ch. 2), compare writing for composition and history (ch. 3), mark the change when writing specifically as a history major (ch.4), and a chapter that compares writing in the major of engineering for school to writing as a professional engineer (two years after graduation). The last chapter reveals the explicit theory and solution that Beaufort connects to the ethnography, followed by an epilogue of an interview with Tim’s freshmen

composition instructor ten years after the study was done in an attempt to hear her voice more definitively. Lastly Beaufort adds appendixes to be thorough and complete, including a sample syllabus that follows the theory presented in the work, samples of the participant's work, and a detailed discussion of the research methodology that Beaufort used.

So is this an ethnography at all? This might seem a harsh and troubling question given that Beaufort herself calls it one (albeit blended), but when understood under the light of the descriptions of ethnography by North and others, it is a fair question nonetheless. She lays out her methodology with precision: she observes one student over six years. More specifically she interviews and collects writing samples during Tim's freshmen, junior, and senior years, then

As a reader, I do not feel drawn into a world of observation in Beaufort's text; instead I see sound bites of interviews that serve a narrowly-defined purpose.

again two years after graduation; so no, they were not six continuous years of observation but rather there were six data sources that were gathered over that time frame. Beaufort had interviews with Tim, critiqued 26 writing samples, looked at the instructors' comments on those samples and shared that work with "experts" in the respective fields of study, and she observed 12 of Tim's freshmen composition classes. This data was

then "analyzed, coded, and read against each other, using the theoretical frames...articulated here for the knowledge domains that compromise writing expertises, as well as heuristics for examining critical thinking" (27).

If the reader starts missing the narrative style often found in ethnography (think Mike Rose), and this is where many see the strength of the methodology as decidedly non-clinical, too bad because it doesn't get much better. There is not much thick description of the student Tim or of his teachers, but we do get short paragraphs of their voices when they help serve the point or issue being discussed. The descriptions that are offered are brief and concise, but they often come across as more prescriptive than descriptive: we know that "Tim" is a "mainstream student (i.e.

middle class and white)” and that he attends “a major private university in the US in the mid-1990s”, although we know this from discussion of the research methodology and not from anything Tim is quoted by (215). We do get to “know” Tim through many other names: “Bloom’s hierarchy”, “Piaget’s schema”, and “Alexander’s framework” (25, 26), my point being that although any good research should be grounded in an understanding of existing theory, Tim’s voice doesn’t seem loud enough or detailed enough in Beaufort’s work to rise above or to challenge any of that theory. I don’t mean to suggest that Tim is not quoted enough — in fact quotes from Tim do fill much of the middle chapters of the book — but it is that the entire book is not written in the narrative style and deep description that is “the staple of ethnography” (Branscomb 5). As a reader, I do not feel drawn into a world of observation in Beaufort’s text; instead I see sound bites of interviews that serve a narrowly-defined purpose. Tim’s freshmen composition instructor, Carla, is even more proscribed as a “poet with an M.F.A.” (Beaufort 33) and as an adjunct-turned-lecturer whose “values regarding freshmen writing tend towards the philosophical position of expressivism” (35), although again this is not Carla who tells us this. The rhetorical choices made by Beaufort further my suspicion of descriptive analysis with phrases such as “Clearly...Carla felt” (35), “ I suspect she was thinking” (49), and “But what Carla also meant” (49). Apparently Carla noticed this proscription as well, as is noted in the epilogue. Ten years after the initial research was done, Beaufort regrets “having conducted a one-way research project” (175). Humility aside, this could be seen as one of the symptoms of conducting ethnographic research but ignoring the story-telling aspect often praised as its strength.

So is this an ethnography? North would say yes and no (and for him that methodological impurity might alone be enough to claim a misuse of the term). Beaufort’s research does follow the suggested outline of ethnographic inquiry:

1. Identifying Problems: Finding a Setting
2. Entering the Setting

3. Collecting Data: Inscription
4. Interpretation: Identifying Themes
5. Verification
6. Dissemination (North 284)

But if one of North's strongest arguments is that ethnography cannot produce knowledge that is generalizable, it would be difficult to defend a single case study that purports to change the writing and tutoring curriculum for an entire country. Beaufort tips her hat at such critique with phrases such as "While not generalizable" (Beaufort 26) but quickly defends her use to "make strong assertions about the data and about the curricular changes the data suggests" (27). The use of a single case study to highlight the need for change in university writing instruction makes the entire work read not as an ethnography but as a metaphor.

North also warns against the risk that "the investigator would like to claim the grounded-in-context power of a phenomenologically-based Ethnography; to say that what she reports is an interpretation of what the [participants] felt and saw, of their 'point of view'" (North 294), but then the researcher also wants to speak beyond her subjects to bring in her own voice and others. This results in what North calls a "rather mixed bag of technique, a sort of Clinical study conducted in a school setting" (294) with people who are both real and paradigmatic. Time and again Beaufort does this sort of interjection, such as when describing the scene of the freshmen composition class seen through the lens of her theory as "Opportunities...were missed" (Beaufort 42) and comments that begin with "could have", "if", and "would have" (39). In many ways, Beaufort's published work fulfills North's worst fears: it is a paradigmatic, generalized, single-case study that uses a mixed methodology to test (or at least illustrate) a theory.

So I ask again, is this an ethnography? I argue that this is something far different from what theorists such as North were debating over 20 years ago. Perhaps it is better to understand Beaufort’s work in light of what Eric Branscomb sees as “the proliferation of voices of teachers sharing their lore” (Branscomb 9) resulting in a mixture of ethnographic methods that moves towards the “methodological egalitarianism”(9) that North hoped for in 1987. If we see Beaufort as a practitioner who hopes to have her voice heard in order to “contribute to theory-building” (Beaufort 26), then it could explain a study that is “two stories” (5) but that also posits “an inductive, data-driven approach to theory-building...a productive marriage of empirical study and theorizing” (222) or a marriage of the theoretical and the pragmatic, the narrative and the paradigmatic. Branscomb sees hope in this mixture and an evolution (largely thanks to the influence of feminism and postmodernism) of ethnography to infuse “lore with a research methodology and thus transmut[ing] lore into knowledge” (Branscomb 9). Clearly Beaufort is aware of the criticism (such as mine) that would follow, but feels justified in her methodology with a sense of commitment and (perhaps) desperation:

You may ask me what qualifies me to set such a bold agenda for a single book, based on a single case study...In	
the spirit of numbering my days, I	I argue that this is something far
am willing to write this now. I	different from what theorists such as
hope that teachers, researchers,	North were debating over 20 years
administrators, and publishers will	ago.
be willing to listen and continue	
working with me on the agenda I set forth in this book. (Beaufort 7)	

As Anne Beaufort writes to be heard and to speak with a case that will “ring true to those experienced in the tricky business of teaching college students to write better” (32), she writes as a practitioner contributing to the making of knowledge; North might even forgive her because of that—he just wouldn’t call her work ethnography.

A Study of Many

Published by Cambridge University Press, benefiting from a grant from the National Council of the Teachers of English, and owing personal thanks to a long list of prestigious names such as Mike Rose, Peter Mortensen, and Bruce Horner, Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives* has about as much *ethos* by the time the reader has gotten through the introduction as a study in composition can get. Published in 2001, this longitudinal study of 80 people (from ages 98 to 10) and the role of literacy in their lives during the last hundred years is an impressive undertaking that aims to "look closely at the sources of the changing conditions of literacy learning and especially at the ways that Americans have faced the escalating pressure to provide for themselves and their children the kinds of literate skills demanded by life in these times" (Brandt 2).

To attempt such an outcome, Brandt did years⁴ of research in the form that she refers to as in "the tradition of life-story research, which is a loose confederation of historical, psychological, and phenomenological inquiry" (10). This mixed-bag of methodologies works in ways familiar to the ethnographer, using "life stories to explore people's subjective worlds, seeking relationships among social structure, personality, and behavior" (10). But Brandt, like many contemporary composition researchers, is aware of the criticism of ethnography and tries to distance her work from the apparent weaknesses or limitations of ethnography:

Ethnographic descriptions do not often speak directly enough and in a sustained way to the histories by which literacy practices arrive or do not arrive in local contexts, flourish or not in certain times and locales. Nor do they often invite a search for the interests beyond those of the local users that hold literacy practices

⁴ Brandt never does specify exactly how many years these in-depth interviews and the following research took, other than to say the interviews were conducted "in the mid-1990s" (9). Certainly the depth and range of participants confirms years that would equate to a longitudinal study.

in place, give them their meaning, or take them away. Nor do they often fully address the mixed motives, antipathies, and ambivalence with which so much literacy is learned and practiced. (8)

Having established a list of “Thall Shalt Nots,” Brandt sees these limitations largely bounded in time and, even though she is aware of the phenomenological nature of conducting interviews and relying upon memory and situation as primary source data, she seeks to conduct research “through a life span and across generations” (8); although to be more accurate she is doing an interview with a particular person at a particular time but asking them to reflect on their entire lifetime.

The analysis of the data resulting from these case studies and interviews is viewed through a lens of what Brandt calls sponsors of literacy, which are “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy – and gain advantage by it in some way” (19). This lens is also focused, as the earlier term “gain advantage” might suggest, through an economic component “to connect literacy as an individual development to literacy as an economic development” (19). As Brandt sees it, the history of literacy in America is directly connected to the ebb and flow, indeed the whims, of this nation’s economy during the last 100 years: from the agrarian-to-industrialized past to the information-economy present where literacy itself is regarded as a raw material and commodity (171).

The book is developed over six chapters, and while Brandt *draws* upon her interviews of 80 people, she uses “exemplar cases...chosen for the clarity and robustness with which they illustrate findings from the larger body of life accounts” (21). These exemplar cases usually come in the form of a deep description of 2 case participants in each of the main chapters, which have been organized by theme. Of note, Brandt describes these “recurrent patterns and themes” developing as a result of the process of collection and analysis from her wide variety of 80

participants (22)⁵. The chapters' themes range from the relationship of the changing rural economy in the agrarian Midwest to the rising standards for literacy, from the effects of being

Although each of these observations are significant and far-reaching, perhaps the most proactive and challenging is the call to public education to adapt to “the new economic order...[f]rom all angles – policy to pedagogy – literacy needs to be addressed in a civil rights context” (206).

outside many educational and economic opportunities of African Americans to an exploration of literacy as a product in the 21st century. In each of these sections, Brandt more or less sticks to a pattern of introducing the theme of the chapter, offering extensive quotations from the participants (most often two exemplar participants⁶), then giving extensive commentary to connect a wider social-historical context of the nation during the lifetime being discussed in order to draw the parallels between economic and literacy learning factors.

Brandt concludes with a series of four grand observations as a result of her research. Although each of these observations is significant and far-reaching, perhaps the most proactive and challenging is the call to public education to adapt to “the new economic order...[f]rom all angles – policy to pedagogy – literacy needs to be addressed in a civil rights context” (206). Even though much of public education in America was founded on the idea of creating productive workers, Brandt wants a “democratic school” (206) that moves beyond that mission to create an informed citizenry in a way that is separate from any economic mission of the nation, to “stabilize the literacy learning and use its [the school’s] formidable resources to augment – beyond the

⁵ I will develop this idea in my later analysis, but Brandt’s early distinction that the patterns and themes came after the data was collected is important in the evaluation of hypothesis-testing versus hypothesis-building. As a further example, see Brandt’s footnote which explains the initial interest in pairing two of the exemplars simply as a result of a coincidental naming convention (215).

⁶ There is an exception to the convention of using a single pair of exemplars when Brandt examines a single family of four generations, and most notably in the chapter that deals with African American experience of literature where she uses smaller quotes from a wider variety of participants.

needs of the market – the value of all the pluralistic forms of literacy” (207). For Brandt, this need is evident as a result of listening to (and telling) the life stories of her participants.

This book is tough to judge on the criteria I have established for ethnography. On the one hand, Brandt’s vivid descriptions of the lives of her participants, the stories she tells, and the extensive quotations where the participants tell their own stories, well that just *feels* more like ethnography. Each of the exemplar cases that Brandt uses comes with an overwhelming amount of pathos and their stories are moving and often inspirational; I feel like I know these people after having read about them.

But on the other hand, I am reading about a small number (we do not hear 80 voices in the published report) of individuals that are all from the same geographic area⁷; we are relying on their memories and deep subjectivity, to then not only talk about literacy in America (after all, the title is not *Literacy in Some American Lives*), but to suggest what we should do about it as an entire nation. I also find the entire notion of the “exemplar cases” a bit troubling. Often these single cases are introduced with phrases that begin with “Consider, first, then, the case of...” (52); the legal-sounding resonance of those words speaks to the overtly paradigmatic position Brandt is putting these people into.

It’s not that she is not aware of this problem. In fact Brandt approaches the self-aware autoethnographic position in her willingness to admit the problems and limitations of her study. The seemingly required *mea culpa* that qualitative research demands is detailed throughout the text as Brandt critiques her own methodology. Qualifiers such as “Especially complicating”; “especially tricky”; “cannot be said to be statistically representative”; “not suggesting that...the only – or even the most typical – experience”; “not because it is representative...for clearly it is not”; “limitations...must be acknowledged”; and many others are sprinkled within every chapter and almost every narrative (12,12,16,36,58,109). But even within her apology, she manages a

⁷ “All the participants were living in south central Wisconsin, virtually all of them in the county surrounding the university that employs me” (Brandt 14).

good defense for these “limitations and dangers” as well (12). After providing the confession of limitations, Brandt challenges that “the methodological limitations I mention as well as the ones I fail to notice myself are indelibly present in (and absent from!) this presentation, there (and not there) for the discriminating reader to weight against my claims” (12). I suppose that is exactly what I am trying to do, but the honest and up-front way in which Brandt gestures to her critics is telling of the state of qualitative composition research today. Like the desperation and frustration in Beaufort’s study, Brandt seems to be operating from a position of the practitioner-researcher who feels she has something valid and worthwhile to say, all the while knowing that the pressures of producing positivistic knowledge really won’t allow her methodologies to go unchecked. It is as though she wants to tell a story, but is restrained by the demands of academic scientism (See Yager 42).

Even though Brandt is careful to not call this work an ethnography⁸, it certainly reads as one. She begins with a question (and not a theory or hypothesis), “How has literacy learning changed over the last century and how have rising expectations for literacy been experienced as part of felt life?” (4). Then she speaks to a number of people to listen to a very personal story told by each one “not as it registers on various scales but *as it has been lived*” (emphasis mine, 11). Then, and this is the really important point for me, she uses phrases of introduction or explanation, vivid narration, and extensive quotation to let the participants tell their stories. Although we rarely perceive the researcher or interviewer⁹, Brandt creates a collaborative feel to the data using phrases such as “I...explored with the people I interviewed”; “we traced together”; “an understanding...is built up from people’s accounts”; and “episodes of literacy learning as people described them” (9,9,9,7). Once the participants have told their very personal narrative,

⁸ Many qualitative researchers seem to distance themselves from the term ethnography, likely as they are aware of the overwhelming criticism. Keith Rhodes mentioned this same dilemma: “some articles studying rather few subjects rather incompletely bravely embrace the term, while other, more thorough investigations give it rather scant mention” (Rhodes 35). Brandt moves around labels by suggesting her work “follows in the tradition of life-story research” and is “aligned in many ways with oral history perspectives” (10); all of these are qualitative, phenomenological modes of inquiry.

⁹ A limitation that Brandt also recognizes and points out (213).

the researcher then steps in to contextualize and interpret the data, to pursue what Brandt calls “a dual dynamic in the experiences of the people I talked with: the ways they have pursued literacy and the ways it has pursued them” (5). Brandt verifies the data by historicizing the data and placing the narratives of her participants in context with the larger narrative of social/economic change in America, then does more interpretation and analysis trying “to separate and categorize these expressions of learning” (6), before she releases and disseminates that data through publication. Not only do these steps match the outline that North suggested for ethnography (see above or North

Not only do these steps match the outline that North suggested for ethnography, but the organization of that outline suggests that the conclusion and theory-building came as a result of the research process – the very center of qualitative and ethnographic research.

284), but the organization of that outline suggests that the conclusion and theory-building came as a result of the research process – the very center of qualitative and ethnographic research.

Literacy in American Lives actually suffers from some of the same drawbacks of methodology as does *College Writing and Beyond*, most especially a tendency to generalize data from paradigmatic case studies and go on to proscribe sweeping reform as a result. But the ways in which the layers of the work are laid down are so vastly different that I want to believe in Brandt’s conclusions more. It is not the numbers (one participant versus eighty), but more the collaboration and narrative description that make me more confident. In the end, I would have to say that this work still falls short of the paradigm that North built (although it may be closer to what Keith Rhodes calls psychography¹⁰). But there is definitely knowledge-making going on here.

¹⁰ As mentioned above, Keith Rhodes sees this as a defensible appropriation and evolution of ethnography for the purpose of composition research. See his article “Ethnography or Psychography: The Evolution and Ethics of a New Genre in Composition”.

Alternative Discourse

So far in this survey of composition research some patterns are beginning to develop. Although ethnography has been called storytelling (not always a derogatory phrase) and we often look for rich and vivid details and descriptions to draw us as readers into the research, that is certainly not always the case in many of these recent publications. Sometimes in the attempt to blend methodologies, the *data* is presented as the richest part of the research and indeed the reader must strain to hear the voices of the participants. That is certainly the case with the 2006

work by Chris Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki.

Sometimes in the attempt to blend methodologies, the *data* is presented as the richest part of the research and indeed the reader must strain to hear the voices of the participants.

Entitled *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines*, the researchers and authors hope to “make a contribution to theory on the growth of writers in and through the academy” (Thaiss 136). But these authors are also aware of being participant-researchers, or in their own term “WID scholar-practitioners” (19), and

to that end are not satisfied with only producing theory with their research; they also want to “strike a balance between meeting scholarly expectations and meeting the practical needs of teachers and program administrators across disciplines” (vi).

The study was driven by two large questions, what does the term “academic writing” mean within the academy and what are the attitudes of academics towards “alternatives” to that type of writing (3). Although these questions are largely framed through the lens of WID and WAC writing programs, Thaiss and Zawacki offer many examples of the problem that can occur when various disciplines all use the same terminology to describe “academic” writing but in fact define those terms in very different ways. It is worth noting that the authors are very careful and

specific in their use of the term “academic writing” to describe an approval of writing style and substance by many that I think would have likely used the term “good writing.” Nonetheless Thaiss and Zawacki set about answering these questions through a longitudinal study¹¹ of 14 instructors in a variety of disciplines, 183 student responses to a survey, 6 student focus groups totaling 35 students, a single individual student interview, results of a timed essay from 40 students, and assessment data from 12 departmental/college workshops on writing (25). All of this data they hope to provide in a manner that will “display the rich, diverse personalities of the students and faculty,” and to be “a book of hypothesis and analysis, but...also a book of stories” (vi). Later I will refer to my disappointment of the text as a result of such a description, but here in the preface Thaiss and Zawacki outline their theory and stories into five chapters.

These five chapters are generally organized in a way that begins with theory and methodology, moves to findings and analysis, then finishes with a call for more research as well as offering specific recommendations for classrooms and program development. This organization is common to most of the qualitative research published in the composition field, as we have seen thus far, and the researchers are aware of the view of qualitative research as being “unavoidably subjective” (25); again the apparent *mea culpa* of the postmodern researcher in composition.

Even though Thaiss and Zawacki call for a “systematic empirical study” of writing in disciplines, their focus is “to achieve a research-based idea of the relationship between the ‘academic standard’ and individual variation” (v) and they spend a good deal of time within the study working to validate, or at least question, the academic assumptions of such individual variations, or what the researchers call “alternative rhetorics” (3). Their premise is essentially that in the composition field, and especially in the WAC/WID field, everyone believes that professors

¹¹ Nowhere in the book do the authors call their study longitudinal. However at several points the timeline and efforts of the research is described as having begun in 2000 (v), having a “first stage” that produced a 2002 article (vi), and specifically to the publication of *Engaged Writers Dynamic Disciplines* as having grown “out of three subsequent years of research” (vi). The mention of these dates not only gives specificity, but also instills credibility, although as my analysis will show this research does not follow any individual or group over a given time span even though it discusses the evolution or “stages” of a writer’s development (109).

in other disciplines have no tolerance for such alternative or personal agency or voice and experimentation in their students' writing, and the authors suggest that this is not necessarily true. While the research is driven by questions, those questions reveal a rhetorical purpose that is perhaps beyond systematic and empirical. Thaiss and Zawacki admit as much when they discuss how their research plan "was driven by" an interest in "arguments for alternative discourses as a way to challenge cultural hegemonies", as they "question some assumptions of the scholarship on alternative rhetorics" (3), and as they "wanted to know how aware [professors in other disciplines] were of arguments about writing to resist or writing on the margins" (27). If one of the principal values of ethnography is to challenge the assumptions of existing research, or what North calls "looking to unseat ... taken-for-granted notions" (North 279), then this bias is acceptable and even should be applauded. But the question is if this predisposition skewed the results, if the researchers found only what they were looking for.

Chapter One deals with the primary research question(s) of trying to define what is academic and what is alternative writing within theoretical and scholarly contexts. Chapter Two purports to let the faculty talk for themselves about these questions, and Chapter Three continues the instructor conversation on "their goals for student writers in their [the students'] disciplines" (Thaiss vii) with the focus on how the faculty are actually teaching students to write. Chapter Four says that "Student voices [will] predominate in this chapter" (vii) as a way of answering, or perhaps triangulating, the voices and opinions of the faculty, and lastly Chapter Five is for conclusions and implications of the study, as well as a call for further research. These final grand observations attempt to reconcile the mistaken impression that one cannot do "academic writing" and be "alternative" at the same time. Thaiss and Zawacki do posit a definition of academic writing (137) and then suggest twelve practices that institutions and instructors should follow if they want to "respect and encourage both passion and discipline" (141) in their students' writing.

As I suggested above, Thaiss and Zawacki seem very aware of some of the problems of the type of research they conducted. They know that this study was conducted on a single

location, although their disclaimer is that they “intend to create a kind of multidimensional model of academic writing – albeit partial – that takes into account the motives of writers working within a local institutional context” (25). There is some nice language here, but I am pretty sure that statement amounts to the “tip of the hat” that I referred to in the beginning of this thesis; *we know this research has limitations but we are going to generalize anyway*. The researchers also know that even as they describe their methodology in detail, that qualitative research is “unavoidably subjective” (25). From how they phrased the survey to their analysis of the data, when “conversation [is used] as a research tool” (26), things will simply get messy due to the limitations of context and all the other problems that have been defined by North and others. While the research is never directly called an ethnography¹², Thaiss and Zawacki nonetheless group the problems with their research under the title of “ethnographic limitations” (26). Here we see perhaps the most notable nod to what those limitations might be, but the researchers’ intent is to ignore those limitations anyway:

Thus, while we are assuming such ethnographic limitations, we nevertheless believe that we can make claims about the contexts in which we conducted the investigation. In turn, we believe readers will find these claims relevant to understanding the contexts in which they work. (26)

Take that, Stephen North.

This sort of treatment of the limitations but the desire to produce knowledge anyway continues through most of the book. When the 14 faculty members are discussed, for example, the researchers state that “we do not intend for these faculty to be taken as spokespersons for their disciplines although, as we will show, each could easily note either a formal center of their discipline in terms of ways of thinking, standards of evidence, and format, or a clear range of acceptable styles” (27). I’ll admit, I don’t really understand the second half of that sentence, the “although...”, and how that relates to the first half. It certainly seems like Thaiss and Zawacki are

¹² A theme I discussed above and one critical to a study of current methodological practice.

willing to acknowledge and anticipate the scholarly reaction to their research, but since they are writing to multiple audiences and those audiences' "practical needs" (vi), that anticipation does not prevent them from sharing such generalizations.

For me, one of the strongest reasons to consider this as an ethnography (or at least judge it by those standards) is in the language Thaiss and Zawacki use, especially in the preface, but also throughout the published study. As a reader, I was excited to see the authors describe their work in the preface as "a book of stories: thumbnail portraits of lives and ambitions expressed in each person's words and our brief narratives" (vi). I guess I didn't realize just how small those thumbnails would be or how much the researchers' narratives would dominate. The anticipation continued with phrases such as "We present their voices and views...their thoughts...their own places...their motives...their goals" (vii). Again, I didn't understand the term "We present" as to mean "We will tell you" and not "You will hear their voices." With chapters titled "Faculty Talk About Their Writing, Disciplines, and Alternatives" and "Students Talk About Expectations, Confidence, and How They Learn," I was looking for the "rich, diverse personalities of the students and faculty" (vi) that are a hallmark of ethnography. But by page 36 I began to realize my misunderstanding and how each of these chapters uses amazingly few quotations to tell a story. Over and over the data is presented with opening phrases such as "these faculty named...their comments confirmed...our informants implied" (36, 37).

I don't mean to be so hung-up on the narrative style of this study, but its impact on the value of the work of ethnography and phenomenological research is important. North said it well:

But the primary text in an Ethnographic study, and its primary source of power, must be the social discourse itself, and not the investigator's inscription thereof. Ethnographic interpretation derived solely from inscribed data, without recourse to actual events, is like literary criticism from reading notes, without recourse to the original text: it can be done, but at a price. (North 304, 05)

I suppose Thaiss and Zawacki attempt to access the “actual events” of the students’ perspectives by going beyond the written surveys and essays and by conducting focus group interviews to get “richer” information than the surveys could provide, to move from “trends and impressions” to “examples, explanations, and comparisons” (Thaiss 99). But in a chapter titled “Students Talk,” instead of thick descriptive stories or extensive quotation, the authors offer 10 generalized summarizations of student expectations which are then all contextualized with percentages of the participants responses: “less than 5 percent...93 percent said that...marked by 114 of our respondents” (103 – 105). Contrast that clinical style with the authors’ desire to produce a book with a “rich view of faculty and student attitudes” (4) and you can understand my disillusionment. When the data becomes more of a locus for the narrative than the participants’ voices, those participants seem to be only subjects of traditional, hypothesis-testing research (Rhodes 28).

Perhaps this methodological confusion can best be explained by a hypothesis purposed by the researchers themselves. As Thaiss and Zawacki try to define academic writing in relation to alternative rhetoric with three main criteria, they also (knowingly or not) discuss the struggle of the qualitative researcher in general and the ethnographer in particular:

But in the academic universe the senses and emotions must always be subject to *control by reason*...The sociologist may describe in passionate detail personal experience of poverty or family dislocation, but the *academic* writer must not stop with the appeal to emotion (what Aristotle called *pathos*); the responsible sociologist must step back, almost as if he or she were a separate person, and place that emotional, highly sensual experience in a *context* of the relevant experiences of others and of the history of academic analysis of the topic.
(emphasis original, Thaiss 6)

Towards this, Thaiss and Zawacki seem to be forging their own alternative discourse for research in composition, an alternative that is shared by many of the researchers I am studying. By being aware of the limitations of qualitative research when juxtaposed with the academy's demands for positivistic and generalizable truth, these authors and practitioners have moved towards what Eric Branscomb calls a "methodological egalitarianism" for qualitative research by mixing and matching case studies, experimental designs, and discourse analysis (Branscomb 9). Keith Rhodes calls this a new form of ethnography, one whose conventions include "reasonably extended study, moderate thickness of description, small focus groups, collaborative separation of teacher and researcher roles, self-conscious personalizing of all participant, and genuine concern for the dignity of the students and teachers being observed" (Rhodes 32). This all seems to be an optimism born out of frustration of the practical value of sharing what North defined as lore. In defining an alternative academic discourse, Thaiss and Zawacky write that "professional academics often find that alternative forms and methodologies can perform rigorous and disciplined inquiry at the same time that they may uncover knowledge not available through more traditional sources" (Thaiss 9). While it may not be intended as such, I think that is a fitting thesis for the work they produced in this study.

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North defined as lore.**

From the Students' Perspective

In 2002 the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) added to their *Studies in Writing & Rhetoric* series the work of Lee Ann Carroll. *Rehearsing New Roles: How College Students Develop as Writers* is a four-year longitudinal study of 20 students and their writing done at Pepperdine University, and according to Carroll, is a chance to discuss the subjects of that development “from the students’ perspective” in order to “offer new insights” (Carroll iv). As though describing the *raison d’être* of ethnography, Carroll argues for the importance of hearing the voices of study participants since “Students who move from course to course, from teacher to teacher, from one discipline to another, often have a broader view of writing in college than the faculty does, and this study is from their perspective” (27).

On the first page of the preface, the reader discovers that the purpose of this study is to demonstrate “why a one- or two-semester, first-year course in writing cannot meet all the needs of even our more experienced writers and show how students’ complex literacy skills develop slowly...over the course of their college years” (xi). But far from being a death-knell for FYC, Carroll uses this study to make recommendations to modify the traditional model of first-year writing courses and to create more specialized upper-level writing requirements, as well as to call for a new view of student assessment strategies (118).

Drawing upon her career as a practitioner, a “teacher of composition and a writing program administrator” (27), a “writing center director and composition specialist responsible for working with faculty across disciplines” (28), as well as from the data produced by this study, Carroll is prepared to make these recommendations to the field. But she is also aware of her limitations when she states that “Composition theory and pedagogy does not qualify me to preach one, true gospel of literacy or cast out the congregation of good teachers” (28). I suggest that

these descriptions all work with a rhetorical purpose to persuade and convince the multiple audiences (xii) of both the quality of her research and the value of her recommendations. Carroll quotes Segal, et al. saying that her goal, and perhaps the goal of any practitioner-researcher doing qualitative research, is to “gain knowledge slowly and respectfully, ideally with the collaboration or cooperation of the members of the community being studied” (28).

But where are the students’ voices in all of this? Carroll uses thick description of each of her 20 participants, quoting from their portfolios gathered over the four-year period, using first names consistently, quoting extensively, and even going so far as describing the financial and employment status of a number of the students that she works with. Chapter One outlines the theory that Carroll will draw upon and gives a preview of this thick description by using four student profiles “to illustrate the variety and complexity of literacy tasks” (10). Here we see subsections titled with a student’s name then are given personal and academic background for the particular student, along with photocopies of student assignments with instructor comments, and quotations from those assignments. Chapter Two discusses the particulars of the research methodology, and this type of close-up and personal detail is continued in Chapter Three and Chapter Four before Carroll moves to her conclusions and recommendations.

Grounded in a 1994 essay by Robert Crowson, Carroll determines that the goal of qualitative research “is to create an understanding of complex, hard-to-measure human behavior as seen from the observed actor’s perspective” (45). Therefore in order to capture the voice of her participants, Carroll uses a methodological approach that begins with comprising a panel of faculty from different disciplines to read or listen to the data from student interviews, having that panel create “thick descriptive profiles of individual students” (44) that were based on that data, generating a hypothesis as a result of the analysis of the data then looking for examples of the accuracy of that hypothesis within the data, then finally triangulating it all by comprising another panel and continuing the analysis (44).

Carroll is, like all of the researchers in my analysis, careful to avoid calling this methodology ethnography, and she is aware that “terms [for qualitative research] such as *ethnographic* or *naturalistic* are contested” (emphasis original 43). However also in the tradition

The contrast of those statements	we see emerging in modern qualitative research,
illuminates the dilemma of using	Carroll sees the potential risks of this methodology as
ethnography for publishable,	“an endeavor fraught with opportunities for
composition research: I don’t want	misrepresentation” (35) and tries to distance her work
to generalize, but I must.	from any suspicion of generalization ¹³ : “I hesitated in

this study based on a small sample of students to generalize about the effects of ‘difference’”, “I resist making any of our study students representatives of an essentialized ‘other’” (36). At one point, Carroll even seems to wash her hands of any responsibility by claiming that “I leave it to readers to decide if the profiles of literacy I offer seem to fit at least some students at a variety of postsecondary institutions” (37). And yet with the frustration we have seen in other efforts to produce and share knowledge about the discipline of composition, one page away from the above hesitations and resistance is this disclaimer: “In this study, while I must generalize to make sense of the data, I try to stay close to the voices of the study students” (37). The contrast of those statements illuminates the dilemma of using ethnography for publishable, composition research: I don’t want to generalize, but I must.

There is much to like about Carroll’s work in this book. In particular, in contrast to the previous studies analyzed above, her dedication to the participants’ voices and the thick description she uses to help the reader “know” or “see” the individuality and dignity of each student is laudable and refreshing. Carroll describes a very personal experience with these 20 students:

¹³ While Carroll does not want to generalize, it is worth noting that the focus of this resistance is based on concepts of gender, ethnicity, and economic status more so than any concern to methodological purity. Throughout the section that discusses the potential weaknesses of qualitative research, she seems sensitive to the fact that Pepperdine University is seen as an overwhelmingly conservative, white, wealthy institution. It is towards that image that her concerns of generalization are based more so than any phenomenological concept.

I came to know the students in our study in interviews and meetings over four years. On a small campus, our paths crossed in classes and in the writing center. One of the students worked in our project office, two others spent a semester studying abroad with me in Florence, Italy. (34)

The format she uses in each section to begin with general observations that group, categorize, and code the data – terms like “Students teach us” or “Themes emerge” or “Nine students” (57, 58) – are then offset by a later transition to the use of an individual name and example to tell the story. This format works for me. The vignettes of each student that Carroll creates feel very personal and more “ethnographic” with their thick description. Even in a project whose data came largely from a panel looking at portfolios – a removal from the primary source that is decidedly not “in the field” – Carroll reminds us of individuality¹⁴: “Ultimately, however, all of the writing in students’ portfolios is personal because it represents the students’ personal experiences with the curriculum” (57).

Towards her goal of telling a story from the students’ perspective, Carroll is clearly arguing from their side when she describes how “college faculty underestimate how writing in college calls for new forms of problem solving and new levels of development” (26) or when she admonishes, “What individual teachers identify as student resistance to meeting their idealized version of ‘good writing’ or ‘critical thinking’ can represent students’ quite reasonable efforts to sort through multiple and, often, conflicting demands on their time and energy, hearts and minds” (27). But perhaps as a result of that passion and a desire to be heard as a practitioner, Carroll begins to speak beyond the study.

Throughout the study, Carroll identifies herself as a practitioner, a teacher, and a tutor who is writing “at a time when academics in the increasingly sophisticated field of composition and rhetoric seem beset by doubts about the value of the work they have traditionally undertaken”

¹⁴ As with her concern for generalization, Carroll’s emphasis on the individuality of her participants seems more related to the theoretical concept of “experienced curriculum” purposed by Kathleen Blake Yancey than by any issue of phenomenological identity (24, 27).

(xii). And she argues that her data supports, demonstrates, and examines that traditional work, not just for her own case study, but for the field at large. Although she admits that she is not qualified to preach, it seems as though she is preaching to the choir:

Some of the recommendations in this volume will be familiar to faculty already engaged in writing across the curriculum or in teaching strategies that promote active learning and critical thinking. However, I want to demonstrate how student data support these recommendations and elaborate on how they play out in practice...(xiv)

This choice of words, “data supports,” is indicative of a study that tests a hypothesis and not one that generates one.

But it is in the last chapter, the seemingly required “so what” section of a published study, that Carroll leaves all pretense of a phenomenological study behind. Although the statements are occasionally qualified with terms like “Our study challenges” or “on the experience of our study” (118, 19), Carroll overwhelmingly (over)projects the value of the data from a single study of 20 students. Based on this study, Carroll argues “that institutions which require a core of general education courses should continue to require a one-semester writing course” (119) as one of the steps to changing the curriculum of writing programs in other institutions to match what Pepperdine University did as a result of Carroll’s localized research. Carroll calls for a specialized one-semester course as a “point of transition” (123), suggests deleting any second-semester writing courses to be replaced with a higher-level writing course within the major discipline, and asks for a look at assessment through a lens of growth and development (qualitative) rather than through a single test or time-based essay (quantitative).

On what authority are these claims based? Because it worked for her: “Based on what we have learned from our longitudinal study, I have revised my own first-year writing course and, currently, as director of composition, I encourage other teachers to make similar changes” (121). Now this is (debatable) appropriate use of such single-site qualitative research. They had a

question, they conducted research, they developed a hypothesis, tested it and refined it, then applied it. But just because “at Pepperdine we have experimented successfully” (123), that doesn’t mean that the results of a 20-student study should be considered data that verifies or proves anything (beyond the original participants).

I don’t mean to suggest that these claims are not useful, or that the six very practical and pragmatic pedagogical recommendations for instructors are not a significant contribution to practice; they are. But this was not a study that

But this was not a study that produced theory -- it was too small and too unique – it was a study that tested theory.

produced theory -- it was too small and too unique – it was a study that tested theory. In effect, Carroll seems to say “we have tried this, and it worked. You should try it too.” If she stopped there, that would be an excellent use of what North defined as lore. But when the conclusions of the study are to suggest a change to how FYC curriculum is designed, to “dispel myths about writing and describe the ways in which college can function as a learning community” (26), and to show how a rubric cannot “account for the success or non-success of students as they go about their actual work as writers across the university” (4), I just think that is too far from what a qualitative study can produce.

Where Are We Now?

Throughout this study I have often quoted and referenced Stephen North's work extensively. I don't mean to suggest that *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* is necessarily the Bible for all composition research, nor that the field has not or should not grow and evolve in the 20 years since its publication. However I will defend my constant reference to that work for its simplicity, idealism, and comprehensiveness. Not many studies produced since have treated the entire field with such a useful (though contentious) taxonomy. It set a benchmark for measurement and categorical identification that, along with its predictions, is still very useful today. But to revisit North's treatment of Ethnography and to complicate its simplicity, to deconstruct its idealism, by way of the research and theory produced since then, is also useful.

Before I offer my overall analysis, I must admit the most obvious and most guiding limitation for my research is the potential for hypocrisy by using a limited amount of published ethnographic studies to make a generalized statement or judgment about the state of composition research. As I performed a rhetorical analysis on the specific studies I approached, I must also do a rhetorical analysis of my own work. While close reading is arguably a completely different methodology than ethnography, much of the basis of critique of ethnography is specifically the power of the written word, the idea that knowledge transfer is complicated by rhetorical choices. Therefore my own research and study should accommodate that principal and be mindful of language that might suggest conclusions beyond the specific studies that I consider. I will speak to a trend that I see from the four works covered above, and it will be up to the reader to apply that evaluation as he or she sees fit.

Likewise to the potential hypocrisy of generalizing, I must also be mindful of another of my criteria: hypotheses-testing or generating. The studies chosen for my research were culled

from a list of recommendations by professionals in the field of rhetoric and composition. My only biases for these final selections were that a) the study used ethnographic methodology, b) the study was published, c) the study was written by a degreed academic, and d) the study was at heart a compositional study: its focus was on composition, literacy, and/or general writing skills. I did not knowingly choose studies that reinforced any hypotheses that these studies might succeed or fail according to North's warnings or my own heuristics.

The fact that there is some value to ethnographic methodology in composition studies is a given, not only due to its popularity but also primarily for the discipline's critical reflection and critique of all its methodologies. It is a hallmark of the field of rhetoric and composition to be critical and reflective, and my analysis has tried to acknowledge the good and the bad within those selected and published ethnographies.

So where are we now in the field of published ethnographic composition research? If I were to paint a composite from the four works I studied, it might look something like this. A qualitative study in composition is likely a longitudinal one—generally longer than one year of observation is required. Regardless of approach, the study is not likely to call itself an ethnography even though it may defend itself using such terms. This disclaimer of qualitative research limitations is a requirement, and the study may go so far as to admit that the subjects or participants are not representative of any larger body.

There is a less-comprehensive picture from how these studies approach the style of the ethnography. Some continue to use the deep-descriptive writing style commonly associated with traditional ethnography, but some have subdued that affect in exchange for more quantitative language full of data and analysis. Likewise the voices of the participants are loud and strong in Lee Ann Carroll's work but hardly merit a complete quotation in Thaiss and Zawacki's. But all the works that I studied do tell a story, and storytelling – even according to North – is what ethnography is all about. The rub, however, is in the *ethos* of who is telling the story.

For the researcher, I posit that the risk to cross a line is often too great. To go from describing *what* a group of participants is doing to telling *why* they are doing it is to cross a line from qualitative to positivistic research. When the researcher says “this is why,” then she or he is saying that there is only one reason why; this is a concept that ignores the unique, individual, and phenomenological aspects of ethnography. When the *ethos* of the author of a study is that of the researcher, largely established through the lack of descriptive narrative and by having a strong proscriptive element to the work, then the story that is being told rhetorically becomes

generalized to apply to all people everywhere.

Overall I see what is happening in these four studies as a change in composition research methodology and how the ethnography is used as a result of institutional pressure.

However the rules change when the *ethos* is that of the practitioner. Although the same concept of non-generalizing applies, the rhetorical choices open up a great deal. Whereas the researcher tends to announce “this works and this is why,” the practitioner seems to whisper “this worked for me,

and you might want to try it also.” This distinction is subtle, but an important one to the legitimacy of a study involving one participant (Anne Beaufort’s *College Writing and Beyond*) or of even eighty (Deborah Brandt’s *Literacy in American Lives*).

Overall I see what is happening within these four studies as a change in composition research methodology and how the ethnography is used as a result of institutional pressure. What Thaiss and Zawacky call an alternative academic discourse and what Keith Rhodes calls psychography is indeed an amalgam of methodologies and an appropriation of agency for the practitioner largely in response to institutional pressure to publish generalizable, positivistic knowledge. Reacting to this pressure, the practitioner – of which all of my four authors are – who wants to share practical pedagogical advice, is forced to couch that advice in rhetorical ambiguity at best and falsely generalizable terminology at worst. While some might regard this strategy as an evolution of composition research, like North, I am concerned that it is a slippery slope unless

the reader contextualizes the research they read and fully understands the purpose of the language choices contained therein. These four published studies all add to the knowledge of the field of composition, but it is important to understand that an ethnography should tell A story, not THE story, regardless of rhetorical style.

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