Book review
The Expanding Universe of Writing Studies: Higher Education Writing Research

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Introduction: The Methodological Apocalypse in Writing Studies

In 1966, more than 50 scholars from the UK, US, and Canada convened at Dartmouth College to discuss the state of the profession of English teaching, ultimately proposing a "growth" model of language learning which contrasted with the skills-based models of curriculum sequencing prevalent at the time. While debates about the impact of the 1966 Dartmouth conference on the teaching of English continue to ebb and flow, from contrasting early accounts by seminar participants (Muller, 1967; Dixon, 1969) to more modern work which situates the conference as a harbinger of the process movement (Trimbur, 2008) or Writing Across the Curriculum (Palmquist et al., 2020), its continued provocation of scholarly discussion has become a legacy in its own right. Even if the Dartmouth Seminar didn't change *anything* happening in the classrooms of its era and thereafter, which is unlikely (Harris, 1991), it would remain a rare moment of international, professional collaboration and consideration virtually unparalleled in our field's history.

Much like the 1966 Dartmouth conference*, The Expanding Universe of Writing Studies: Higher Education Writing Research* (2021), a volume born out of a 50th anniversary conference hosted at Dartmouth in 2016, seeks a comparable moment of consideration, codification, and organization for the vast array of methods and methodologies at the center of Writing Studies research in higher education. Editors Kelly Blewett, Tiane Donahue, and Cynthia Monroe ultimately argue that, in the sweep of Writing Studies' development as a field, this is another important moment (much as it was in 1966) in which to try and broker tentative agreements about meanings, measures, methods and in doing so unveil future directions for research in the field.

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Organization

The book begins with two outstanding chapters, one by Chris Anson on the emergence and growth of the field of Writing Studies since 1966 (which he terms "The Big Bang"), followed by a chapter written by Dylan Dryer which attempts to "table," or organize, *all* of the research methods in modern Writing Studies. The remaining twenty-one chapters present a diverse arrangement of writing research which all attempts to survey the rich spectrum of methods and methodologies at work in the field, from single subject, qualitative, ethnographic survey and interview work to quantitative and mixed methods research focused on massive datasets or corpora of written texts. In setting forth a varied selection of research on writing organized around a master table of methods and methodologies, the volume attempts to demonstrate the common, often overlapping concerns, theoretical orientations, and objects of study at work in the field.

Chapters Three and Four both use corpus linguistics, one to investigate the use of passive voice and other impersonal style features in engineering interviews (Conrad), and the other focused on discourse across texts in student writing (Aull), respectively; a demonstration of the varied purposes and types of writing and language which a single method might be used to study. Chapters Five and Six approach writing assessment from two very different perspectives; analyzing frequently used terms in a corpora drawn from leading writing assessment journals (Poe), and using short, predetermined "slices" of text for the purposes of large-scale direct assessment of student writing (Barton et al.). All of these studies focus on written products in order to try and understand how different methods and approaches can illuminate how we conceive the many textual features of writing.

The volume then shifts towards the theoretical. Chapter Seven highlights an emerging framework in applied linguistics, Transdisciplinary Action Research (TDA), which attempts to facilitate "theoretically grounded and systematic collaboration between researchers and practitioners," and that the author contends may hold potential value for scholars and researchers in Writing Studies more broadly (Perrin, 105). The following three chapters all focus on different ways of analyzing and understanding dialogic exchanges; a content analysis of student-writing tutor interactions (Lerner), interactive interviewing (Webb-Sunderhaus), and context-specific responses to student writing (Blewett, Bowden, and Leijen). All of these studies demonstrate novel approaches to data analysis which in turn encourage newfound perspectives for interrogating objects of study commonly encountered in higher education contexts.

The chapters immediately thereafter focus on social, cultural, and linguistic contexts of learning. For example, in Chapter Eleven, Jessica Early examines the challenges of implementing social justice oriented writing research in K-12 contexts. In Chapter Twelve, using analysis of student texts, Shawanda Stewart makes the case for Critical Hip Hop Rhetoric Pedagogy as a way to connect

curriculum to the communities and culture of which students are a part. And Chapter Thirteen, by Ellen Cushman, centers on decolonial translation, a reflective method which accounts for, and decenters, the influence of dominant cultures on translation practices. Then, in Chapter Fourteen, Sinfree Makoni uses a linguistic and economic approach to understand how language practices in markets in Zimbabwe might help us to understand the language power structures. These four chapters all illuminate how cultural assumptions shape writing research, goals, and methods.

The volume then takes a socio-cognitive turn. Brian James Stone shares the results of an interview-based ethnographic case study in order to challenge assumptions that multilingual writing is a straightforward process, calling for the development of self-critical, international, and ethnographic research methods. In Chapter Sixteen, Deborah Brandt uses biographical testimonies to illustrate how reading interanimates writing, revealing how reading is the primary activity, and writing the primary vehicle, through which learners achieve literacy. Calling for the incorporation of analytical feedback into activity theory, Clay Spinuzzi argues for a new theoretical model centered on dialogism in order to address the methodological limitations of 3GAT (third generation activity theory). Stone, Brandt, and Spinuzzi all challenge current theoretical models and the epistemological presumptions which accompany them in order to push forward expanded methodological conceptions of how writing research might be pursued.

In a similar way, Joanna Wolfe convincingly argues for the value of quasi-experimental research in Chapter Eighteen before David Gailbraith presents a well-conceived dual-process model of writing that attempts to reconcile external, social forces with the internal, cognitive elements of writing. And the cognitive theme persists in Chapter Twenty, where Tallal & Rogowsky focus on the development of children with auditory processing and language impairments by using cognitive interventions designed to improve facility with spoken and written language. Each of these chapters advocates for a reconsideration of well known, previously established areas of research and the potential benefits of approaching their investigation in newly integrated ways.

A cognitive-developmental focus rounds out the volume, with Kevin Roozen tracing an individual student's literate activity through multiple contexts (Chapter Twenty-One), Ryan Dippre investigating one student's use of notebooks over a twenty-year period in order to shed light on lifespan writing development (Chapter Twenty-Two), before Charles Bazerman decisively explores the particular challenges of conducting writing research across the lifespan (Chapter Twenty-Three). The volume's concluding chapter consciously avoids summative generalizations as drawn from the volume's previous chapters and instead presents an intriguing series of research questions for continued inquiry. The volume does not present a summary of chapters in lieu of three unique features,

namely Dryer's "Table of Research Methods" found in Chapter Two, chapter responses by fellow conference participants, and a "guided path" organization that includes interchapters which signal the ways in which projects overlap methodologically and phenomenologically. The interchapters and chapter responses give the volume a unique feel, as they function as a chorus of critical guidance not only on the potential contributions of each chapter but also on the limitations and questions raised by each work.

Contributions

Anson's introduction convincingly establishes the continued expansion of the field of Writing Studies using several metrics, including the growth of graduate programs and dissertations, professional journals, and undergraduate majors and writing centers. And the enduring impression one is left with after reading through all these chapters is that, as he puts it in the introduction, the proliferation of writing studies "has come at the cost of an increasingly fragmented community" (p. 15). It is impressive that, in the face of all of this fragmentation, so convincingly revealed through the many diverse offerings in this volume, Dylan Dryer is somehow able to wrangle a supremely useful central heuristic, which he presents in a comprehensive table of research methods in contemporary Writing Studies.

At once a heuristic *and* epistemic tool, Dryer acknowledges the terministic reduction, or partial view, afforded by any table, especially those which use words instead of numbers, in order to then establish the remaining value which the table offers: "facilitat[ing] comparison by arranging felicitous conditions for discovery… for seeing the familiar in complex and perhaps novel contexts" (p. 32). A product of the many "interesting disagreements and productive compromises" which were a part of the discussions at the conference in 2016, and which led the Table through four major revisions by conference participants during that time, the table is starkly juxtaposed with the many diverse perspectives on the study and teaching of writing found in the chapters of the volume, all of which utilize *different* methods and methodologies to interrogate *different* objects of study, or approach the same or similar objects of study in *different* ways or with *different* goals and aims. By tracing the motivating questions and constructs of interest, assumed premise(s), methods of data collection and analysis, validation measures, and contributions across twenty-six different research methods, the table offers "a glance at the scope and complexity of our field at this moment in time" (p. 35) that will undoubtedly spur much conversation and debate (as well as continued revision) for many years to come.

The other interesting theme which emerges from the volume is the continued interrelatedness of social and cognitive approaches to writing research. Galbraith's chapter in particular offers not only a novel theoretical synthesis in this regard, the dynamic interaction between implicit and explicit knowledge as

conceived of as a dual-process way, or model, with which to bridge the gap between the many social and cognitive factors that influence writing, but also a framing of the inquiry as an extension of Britton's work on discovery through writing, itself a product of Britton's time at the 1966 Dartmouth conference. Spinuzzi's challenge to third generation activity theory (3GAT), wherein he calls for the incorporation of analytical feedback, furthers the contributions of this volume insofar as they aim to integrate socially focused research with and within the sociocognitive. And that these two chapters are preceded by Deborah Brandt's decidedly social exploration of reading as the primary activity for developing literacy exemplifies how the "guided path" organization of this volume provides an interlinked progression of complimentary research methodologies which invite the reader to consider, question, and even consolidate understandings of where one research tradition connects to, overlaps with, or diverges from another.

Conclusion

In a discussion I once had with Charles Bazerman about the potential value of replication as a pedagogical method, he allowed that replication *could* be good training, before pointing out that whatever value replication might hold does not mean that we "in the long run… should restrict what we do. I think that there is still too much to discover about our multidimensional subject to limit what we are looking for and the way we might be looking" (personal communication, May 1st, 2020). The desire for comprehensibility threatens to obscure a complex series of decisions, assumptions, and motives which our field has simply not yet reached the point of definitely agreeing upon for the simple and pervasive reason that *The Expanding Universe of Writing Studies* repeatedly highlights: there is still so very much to learn about writing. As James Moffett opined about the 1966 conference in eerily similar language, "the shrinking of the curriculum to fit the measuring standards is precisely what the Dartmouth Seminar denounced" (*Coming on Center,* 16).

While Bazerman obviously has a point—each decision, each presumption, and each motive we collectively decide upon threatens to shrink or diminish the borders of our inquiry—I also think there is room for moments of reckoning; for measures of progress, and even for apocalyptic unveilings (to extend Anson's cosmological analogy a bit further), however reductive. This volume is a different type of reckoning than Dartmouth in 1966; smaller, more specialized and differentiated, with more refined issues and concerns, shaped more sharply by the passage of time and the emergence of varying movements within the field (WAC, WID, FYC), as well as the expansion of Writing Studies in general. Ultimately, however, this volume seeks to investigate and coalesce the same basic questions, motivations, and methods available for pursuing the "core relationship" between the research and teaching of writing that the conference

at Dartmouth did in 1966 by advancing a partial but provocative snapshot of the field that is communicated inventively through several features unique to this collection (Anson 21).

The chapters in the collection exemplify an array of methods, objects of study, and motivations for inquiry which cohere around a common goal of using transparent and replicable research methods *that can be pushed forward*; tested, extended, challenged, and disrupted in the same way they have been over the last 50 years. For even after the sweep of time and progress in the field since the Dartmouth Seminar in 1966, writing *remains* a very complex phenomenon. And while no amount of research will make it any less complex, researching writing nonetheless incurs an equally complex series of methods with which to investigate it. And if that's true, then it is going to take a very long while to investigate writing adequately and firmly establish the field in a manner comparable to its older disciplinary siblings, Psychology and Education. That, as Anson puts it, "we are learning that writing is vaster and more complex than our predecessors in Dartmouth's Sanford Library dreamt" is as undeniable as the fact that our progress since 1966 has made it "not as mysterious as [the Dartmouth participants] assumed' (417). We must at once not limit our exploration of writing while also harkening the advances found in related work, but we must be *aware* of other related work first. This volume is a massive step forward in that regard.

If it's true that because writing is such a complex phenomenon that it will take generations of truly international collaboration to study it comprehensively, the argument inlaid to this volume seems to suggest, then we, as a field need to produce research which can *persist* across generations of scholars and which can be conveyed across cultural boundaries; research that is methodologically transparent and systematic enough that it can be *built upon* and *carried forward* across time. The vast array of methodologies at work in our field at the present moment are all important considerations in and for this long-term effort and vision. And that mandate is why reckonings large and small like both the Dartmouth Conference of 1966 *and* this volume are imperative. They are deliberately reflective moments in which to organize what has happened and amalgamate those lessons in a manner conveyable enough to transcend the many cultural, linguistic, and disciplinary borders which abound Writing Studies so that all can learn from and look forward to future directions in writing research using the lessons of the past to guide, but not restrict, their efforts.

Besides scholars of all types in Writing Studies, Composition and Rhetoric, English Education, Technical and Professional Communication, Education, Linguistics, and Educational Psychology, this volume offers particular value to graduate students, programs, and classes concerned with the study of writing. Though I've highlighted the first two chapters as particularly useful, the many other contributions in this volume, and the guided path organization it utilizes through a progression of interconnected methods and methodologies, have

much to offer both to those new to the field and to those already vested in particular approaches to Writing Studies, as well as to those who are interested in expanding their awareness of other methods and means.

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