COMPOSITION STUDIES: APPLIED RESEARCH AND STEPHEN M. NORTH'S *THE MAKING OF KNOWLEDGE IN COMPOSITION: PORTRAIT OF AN EMERGING FIELD*

ROBERT A. SCHWEGLER

Stephen M. North, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field* (Upper Montclair: Boynton/Cook, 1987), 403 pp.

In many English departments and literature programs, competing methods of literary criticism like deconstruction, reader-response, and the new historicism are viewed as unwelcome threats to a comfortable unity of purpose in commenting on texts and instructing students in the proper methods of interpretation. In contrast, composition researchers have eagerly embraced techniques like case study, discourse analysis, and controlled experiment, and writing teachers have turned for help to specialists in reading,

elementary language arts, and cognitive psychology. The extent of this diversity in composition studies, its causes, and the consequences for the small but rapidly-growing field are the subjects of Stephen M. North's *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field.*

In order to discover (or impose) order amid the welter of voices in composition studies, North identifies a number of "*methodological communities,*" that is, "groups of inquirers more or less united by their allegiance to one such mode, to an agreed-upon set of rules for gathering, testing, validating, accumulating and distributing what they regard as knowledge" (1). Some of the communities he discusses are relatively familiar (Historians, Experimentalists); others less so (Clinicians, Philosophers). His treatment of teachers (Practitioners) as makers of knowledge, not merely as technicians applying the results of research, calls into question some widely-held notions about both research and pedagogy. And his critiques of generally-admired studies by Janet Emig, Lee Odell, and others are evidence of a gradual tightening of standards for validity and design in composition scholarship. Paradoxically, however, the discussions of the various communities of knowledge makers contain evidence and potential contradictions that can be seen as undermining many of North's conclusions. Yet these discordant elements can also be viewed positively, both as a product of North's success in separating and analyzing the different strands of inquiry and as an impetus for further study.

The Making of Knowledge in Composition opens with an account of composition's development as a field within English studies and then examines eight knowledge-making communities within three broad groups: Practitioners (What do we do?), Scholars (What does it mean?), and Researchers (What happened or happens?). Each community is accorded a separate chapter consisting of "a review of its beginnings in the field, an analysis of its assumptions and procedures, and a consideration of the kind of knowledge it produces" (4).

According to North, composition studies have been characterized over the past two decades by a movement away from practice-oriented, classroom-based knowledge to inquiry grounded in contemporary theory. Accompanying this movement has been a hostility towards most current pedagogy for its failure to take current

research into account. In this context, North's account of "The Practitioners," which views the teaching of writing as—at times—a form of inquiry, is in some ways the most intriguing of his discussions of individual communities. North argues that many Practitioners can be considered makers of knowledge, not merely technicians applying knowledge generated by others. The body of knowledge generated and sustained by Practitioners he calls "*lore*: the accumulated body of traditions, practices, and beliefs in terms of which Practitioners understand how writing is done, learned, and taught" (22). His list of influential Practitioners (including some with additional credentials as Philosophers) makes a strong case for treating practice as inquiry: Donald Murray, Donald Hall, Elaine Maimon, Toby Fulwiler, Muriel Harris, Peter Elbow, and Mina Shaughnessey, among others (22).

Lore is, however, an atypical form of academic knowledge. It is loosely organized, predominantly oral and accumulative, lacking in the mechanisms of self-critical analysis that are part of other methodological communities:

> While anything can become a part of lore, nothing can ever be dropped from it, either. There is simply no mechanism for it. Lore's various elements are not pitted against one another within the framework of some lore-specific dialectic or checked and re-checked by Practitioner experiments, so that the weakest or least useful are eliminated. Indeed, lore can—and does—contain plenty of items that would, were they part of some other system, be contradictory. (24)

The rather ramshackle collocation of knowledge that results from this—The House of Lore—has both its cause and justification in our daily experience as teachers. Composition instruction poses at any one time an overwhelming number of problems for a teacher, the result of varying levels of student development, the intricate demands of even a simple writing task, and the inadequacies of even the best curriculum. Survival and success can therefore depend on strategies that make the classroom experience more routine and more manageable. Units on invention or paragraphing, peer group and collaborative arrangements, grammar drills and freewriting sessions—all these divergent practices have a place in the compendious House for Lore and may even work together in practice despite their seeming incompatibility. Not

all teaching activity qualifies as inquiry, however: only that which generates fresh knowledge by creating a pedagogy for unfamiliar situations or for settings in which traditional approaches no longer suffice.

Three communities are responsible for what North terms scholarly inquiry: *Historians*, whose work focuses on assembling and interpreting historical materials; *Philosophers*, concerned with the field's underlying assumptions and beliefs; and *Critics*, who establish a body of texts (perhaps a canon) and offer interpretive readings of them. Knowledge-making in each of these fields is dialectical, consisting of successive historical narratives, philosophical statements, or interpretations. The process of agreement, contradiction, and debate that accompanies these statements is taken by members of the community to be the primary method of establishing or undermining the validity of a particular line of argument. Such dialectic has admittedly been relatively scarce in composition scholarship, except for occasional interchanges like those between Janice Lauer and Ann Berthoff or Robert Connors and Sharon Crowley (analyzed in detail by North). As more scholars enter the field and the many now discrete areas of scholarship begin to overlap, we can expect a more powerful dialectic to develop.

Though *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* offers a detailed and interesting tour of these scholarly communities, its conclusions are not likely to seem surprising to most readers. In contrast, both the categories into which North divides empirical research and his comments on the work of individual researchers are likely to cause some controversy. In his scheme, research inquiry takes place in four communities: 1) *Experimental*, consisting of researchers "who seek to discover generalizable 'laws' which can account for—and, ideally, predict—the ways in which people do, teach, and learn writing," 2) *Clinical*, whose members study "individual 'cases': most commonly, the ways in which a particular subject does, learns, or teaches writing," 3) *Formal*, whose members "build models or simulations by means of which they attempt to examine the *formal* properties of the phenomena under study" much as Linda Flower and John Hayes have done in their work on the composing process, and 4) *Ethnographic*, consisting of researchers whose "peculiar concern is with people as members of communities," and whose "mode of inquiry equips them to

produce knowledge in the form of narrative accounts of what happens in those communities" (137).

North treats Experimentalists as positivists, committed to discovering general principles of behavior and to the objective observation of phenomena in controlled settings. The bias against this approach and in favor of naturalistic, case-study methods "which [assume] that context cannot be stripped from the experience under study and that the researcher cannot stand apart from what he or she observes" (Brannon, 8) is not as apparent here as it has been in many other recent discussions of composition research (see, for example, McClelland and Donovan). Instead, North's account acknowledges the lure of certainty offered by sharply focused and tightly controlled experiments, while at the same time questioning whether such highly specific research will ever form a body of knowledge broad enough to have a significant effect on the teaching of composition. The main vehicle for the critique of the methods and consequences of experimental research is a detailed review of several highly-regarded studies, including an examination of the effects of instruction in prewriting by Lee Odell and a study of sentence combining by Donald Daiker, Andrew Kerek, and Max Morenberg. The astringency of these reviews may in fact limit their effectiveness, evoking sympathy from many readers, especially those who understand the difficulties and constraints of experimental inquiry (Myers, 25).

The identification of the Clinical method as a mode of inquiry is occasioned (North says) by a need to account for a single remarkable exemplar, Janet Emig's *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*, and for subsequent studies that have worked within the pattern established by Emig. Emig herself has attacked positivist research with considerable vehemence, and her own work is generally regarded as a prime example of naturalistic research (Calkins). For North, however, clinical research is positivist in assumption and design, a non-identical twin of experimental research:

> The experimentalists seek generalizable laws, patterns that hold for whole populations. Clinicians, on the other hand, are concerned with what is unique and particular in some unit within a population (a writer, a teacher, a writing tutorial, etc.), but they also bring to bear on their investigations all

that they know about the larger population of which that unit is a part; in short, they are concerned with the manifestation of those general laws in particular instances. (200)

Formalist research, too, fits a broad definiton of positivist inquiry insofar as it proposes models representing general principles governing writing and the teaching of writing and then tests or modifies these models through empirical inquiry. Indeed, one might speculate that the impulse to serve teachers and students by constructing studies whose results are generalizable to a variety of classrooms means that positivist methods are likely to continue to dominate composition research. Among the researchers studied by North, only the Ethnographers escape from positivist assumptions.

Ethnographic research produces detailed accounts of social events involving writing—unique, non-generalizable observations because in phenomenological terms all such events are unique. The gradual accumulation of such accounts may make it possible, however, to identify themes and patterns leading to a kind of cumulative knowledge or understanding. But few studies have as yet been able to employ this approach consistently. Moreover, doubts among other researchers and among Ethnographers themselves about the kind of authority such studies can achieve makes the future of ethnographic studies uncertain.

Running throughout North's discussions of research communities is a curious lament about the "Implications for Instruction" or similar sections that appear at the end of so many studies. To North, this seemingly harmless urge to speculate about practical consequences or to attempt to shape pedagogy is dangerous. At one point, for example, he claims that it is a "tragedy . . . that this misdirected ambition has both subverted and obscured much of what is potentially most valuable in Clinical inquiry" (237).

For North, the impulse to reform pedgagogy often drives researchers to make statements beyond the authority established by a particular mode of inquiry and to draw conclusions for which their work does not and cannot provide any substantiation. He locates the impulse to make such statements outside the methodological communities, in "the larger society of Composition" and in the desire of individuals for political and pedagogical influence. The following is typical of comments scattered throughout the discussion of the various methods:

> The danger to Philosophical inquiry is clear: To move outside the bounds of method, whatever the short-term gains in reform . . . is to risk the demise of methodological integrity. . . . the impulse that drives such Scholarly reformism, the urge to make the world a better place, is surely understandable. But modes of inquiry are in some ways very restricting things; to accept what power they offer is to accept, as well, that there are still things they cannot do—or at least, that they cannot do and still be themselves, sustained by the investment of the community of inquirers. (115)

The grounds of North's argument—the appeal to a kind of methodological decorum and restraint as well as the avoidance of disorder—seem reasonable enough. And the reasoning appeals as well to a widely-held belief among academics that theory and practice are two different things, a belief North accommodates by relegating the purely practical to one methodological community—Practitioner inquiry—and by restricting the pedagogical consequences of other forms of inquiry to the narrow limits established by the specific design of the research or the primary focus of the method.

But there is something at once untidy and too tidy about North's solution. The persistence with which researchers and scholars turn to the broad pedagogical implications of their work and the seriousness with which they take the task of redirecting classroom practice need to be accounted for. Discussions of teaching implications appear so often in composition scholarship that they appear to be obligatory elements in the lines of reasoning, not merely superficial conventions. To dismiss the discussions as the result of reformist impulses external to the logic of scholarship and research may be a tidy solution, but it sweeps away evidence which indicates that the making of knowledge in composition may never be as precise and as constrained by the logic of a particular pattern of inquiry as North seems to suggest.

With the exception of some work in business and technical writing, almost all inquiry in composition is either classroom-based or operates within a set of instructional assumptions, as, for instance, the study of novice and experienced writers entails assumptions about the processes of development and learning. Thus a discussion of implications for teaching that goes beyond the limits

of a particular experimental or historical method may represent an attempt to contextualize the narrowly configured knowledge produced by the inquiry within the assumption about writing and learning animating the study and in doing so to link it to patterns of thought within the field as a whole.

Even the methods of inquiry themselves are shaped to a greater extent than North acknowledges by instructional assumptions. As a chemist or biologist might point out, the inferential statistics and research designs employed in experimental studies in composition are not scientific in any pure sense. They are borrowed from the field of education and reflect its postulates, not those of the natural sciences or of other social sciences like sociology or psychology. And the narratives produced by historians are stories of teachers, classrooms, students, and texts; the lines of influence and causation they trace generally assume that the central agents of change are pedagogues, often motivated by a search for a better or for a more efficient way of teaching writing.

It is possible, therefore, to view the differences among communities of researchers or even within communities as, in essence, differences in pedagogical stance. Thus the emphasis in experimental research on the control of variables or on specifying and limiting the instructional treatment may reflect not so much a positivist approach as a belief that learning takes place primarily because of some particular teaching strategy or instructional material. Ethnographic research, in contrast, may be driven by the assumption that learning takes place as a result of interaction within a community, either the classroom community or a larger social unit. And the focus on individuals in clinical research may reflect a view of learning and teaching that gives primacy to individual transformation.

This alternate perspective on the methods of study both grows out of and threatens to undermine North's attempt to make sense of the diversity of composition research by identifying a set of methodological communities. It suggests, moreover, that Practitioner inquiry is the archetypal form of knowledge in composition and that the other forms of inquiry are simply refinements of the paradigm, each dealing with a different aspect of the subject and each grounded in different assumptions about teaching and learning.

Viewed in this way, almost all research in composition is ap-

plied research, and the field as a whole is a technical or practical one, though it often benefits, of course, from work in rhetorical theory, discourse analysis, and cognitive psychology. The contradictions and tensions that North describes between Practitioners and those engaged in other forms of research may be the result not only of the rapid growth of knowledge but also of an attempt to alter the postulates upon which composition studies currently rest, to move away from the primacy of practice and embrace forms of inquiry driven by their own logic rather than their roots in teaching and learning. But to move in such a direction is to risk being cut off from the sources of power and insight that have been vital to the growth of the field. I see such a development as eventually harmful to the field, and I suspect North may as well, though the logic of his argument seems at times to point to its inevitability. Perhaps the real success of *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* lies, therefore, not in the patterns of inquiry it identifies, but in the arguments and the alternate explanations it provokes.

Bob Schwegman is Associate Professor of English/Writing at the University of Rhode Island. He is author of numerous articles on composition and literature and a number of books, the latest being *Patterns in Action*, second edition.

WORKS CITED

Brannon, Lil. "Toward a Theory of Composition." In *Perspectives on Research and Scholarship in Composition*, ed. Ben W. McClelland and Timothy R. Donovan. New York: MLA, 1985, pp. 6-25.

Calkins, Lucy McCormick. "Forming Research Communities among Naturalistic Researchers." In *Perspectives on Research and Scholarship in Composition*, ed. Ben W. McClelland and Timothy R. Donovan. New York: MLA, 1985, pp. 125-144.

McClelland, Ben W., and Timothy R. Donovan, eds. *Perspectives on Research and Scholarship in Composition*. New York: MLA, 1985.

Myers, Miles. "More about 'The Making of Knowledge.' " *The CSW/NWP Quarterly* (1988): 24-25.