2019 SWCA Keynote Address

Ongoing Conversations in Writing Center Research: Empirical Research

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My purpose is to discuss empirical studies in writing center research. Currently, writing center tutors and administrators are publishing three types of studies: practical studies, which discuss and give advice about new or sometimes not-so-new developments in writing centers; conceptual studies, which present mostly top-down theoretical analyses of writing center occurrences; and empirical studies, which, although beginning with a review of research, develop knowledge mostly bottom up based on observations and experiences (Liggett, Jordan, and Price 2011). I am going to talk about empirical studies, rather than the other two, because I believe their methods and results can make significant contributions to understanding important issues in writing centers and because, more than other studies, they can increase our understanding of learning.

Empirical research attempts to observe and explain our experiences and our students' experiences in writing centers. The resulting information is empirical data. These data are examined and analyzed systematically according to generally accepted methods that other researchers can replicate. The possibility of replication usually includes the procedures for the selection of participants, for data collection methods, and for analysis. Currently, in writing studies, empirical research is often referred to as RAD (Driscoll and Perdue 2012; Haswell 2005)—R is for "replicable," and A is for "aggregable." If a study is replicated, the results of the first study and the replicating study are comparable in some way, and if the results agree, we are closer to developing confidence in both sets of findings. Finally, D is for "data supported." Instead of *RAD*,

I prefer the term *empirical* because it is more commonly used in social science research and thus enables cross-disciplinary understanding. In fact, in the database searches I conducted for this presentation, RAD appeared to be relegated to writing studies research only. Furthermore, in this presentation, I will not incorporate the detailed coding often associated with identifying RAD articles. Instead, I will identify empirical research according to (1) research purposes that can be achieved only through data collection and (2) possibilities for replication. The task of classifying articles as empirical or not proved difficult and reminded me of the importance of systematic coding and of working with a partner (See Driscoll and Perdue 2012).

Empirical research can be qualitative or quantitative, and in some studies, both types of data are collected and analyzed (Driscoll and Perdue 2012). The difference is that quantitative data are numerical, while qualitative data are verbal, usually discussed as themes or patterns. For example, to identify and describe strategies tutors used in a carefully selected collection of transcribed writing center conferences, a researcher may search for themes. A qualitative researcher might stop there and write an article analyzing and interpreting the themes he or she found. However, the researcher might also proceed to develop and test a coding scheme based on those themes and then apply that scheme to another corpus of transcribed conferences to see how often tutors use the strategies identified and described in the themes. The number of occurrences for each tutoring strategy is divided into the total number of minutes in the conferences. Then, we can compare how often tutors use each strategy in this collection of conferences. These regularized frequency counts provide quantitative data. I will discuss some other qualitative and quantitative studies later in this presentation.

What are the benefits of empirical research? Why should we do empirical research rather than rely entirely on our own experiences as tutors and administrators? Empirical research is the most reliable way we can determine our effectiveness and improve our services and learn about other issues important for writing centers. It brings together more data than our personal experiences can accommodate; provides ways of systematically examining numbers, occurrences, and experiences; and leads us to viewpoints possibly different from our original thinking. In fact, because many universities require supposedly disinterested

accountability to continue funding, most of us are familiar with empirical research in the form of program assessment.

Now that I have defined my stance and key terms, let's examine some writing center research. I decided to focus on the *Writing Center Journal* (*WCJ*) as a source of empirical research worth examining because it is the second oldest journal publication in our field and arguably our flagship research journal. As I am sure most of you know, the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, now called *WLN :A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, is the oldest. However, *WLN* is more likely to publish practical studies than the empirical studies we are seeking.

The rest of this discussion has three parts. First, I will compare the articles published in the first issue of *WCJ* with those published in the last issue I had access to when I began developing this article—volume 36, issue 1, 2017. Next, I will examine the percentage of empirical studies published per volume from the first online volume, 25, 2005 to volume 36, 2017. Finally, I will discuss some categories of topics that spurred the articles.

In the analyses, I have included only peer-reviewed articles, eliminating keynote addresses, editors' introductions, and book reviews.

1.0 The Growth of Empirical Research about Writing Centers— *WCJ*, 1.1 1980 and 36.1 2017

The first issue of *WCJ* appeared in 1980. It was edited by Stephen M. North and Lil Brannon and had four articles covering 45 pages. Here is a list of titles, authors, and brief article summaries. None of these report empirical studies.

> "One on One, Iowa City Style: Fifty Years of Individualized Instruction in Writing"—Lou Kelly

This article begins with the history of the Writing Lab at University of Iowa and its connection to the exit requirement in freshman composition that students write an acceptable 500-word theme. Failing students had to go to the Writing Lab until they could pass the requirement. The Writing Lab typically provided instruction focused on the syntax and grammar of the model 500-word theme until Lou Kelly began to ask

students to write essays about their writing experiences, allowing them to vent. The students knew the essays would not be graded. She found that when writing and tutoring became less pressured and more personal, students' grammar and syntax improved. In accordance, she suggested that conferences should become more conversational, with tutors providing a caring and safe place for students, where they could build confidence. Hence, Kelly saw the importance of the tutors' role in helping students become better writers.

> "The Hartford Sentence-Combining Laboratory: From Theory to Program"—William Stull

This article discusses required weekly two-hour sentence combining sessions for basic writing students. The sentence-combining practice replaced the required grammar instruction, which had been previously provided by the writing lab. The goal of sentence-combining exercises is to help students increase the syntactic maturity—sophistication, complexity—of their sentences.

> "Hamlet, Polonius, and the Writing Center"—Thomas Nash from Auburn University

This article has a long preamble comparing professors assigning essays, students coming to the writing center, and the writing center director to characters in *Hamlet*. It advocates that writing centers focus on all stages of the composing process—not only on proofreading. Tutors should assist students with prewriting and invention, and the focus of tutoring should be on writing as a process.

> "Beyond Freshman Comp: Expanded Uses of the Writing Lab"—Muriel Harris and Kathleen Blake Yancey

The article has two parts. The first part discusses offering writing center tutoring to students enrolled in courses across the curriculum and to local businesses. The second part discusses the Purdue Writing Lab's expansion into offering courses to prepare students for the verbal section of the LSAT (Law School Aptitude Test) and the GMAT (Graduate Management Admissions Test).

Even though none of these articles can be added to our empirical tally, they are interesting because they allude to topics that have become important in empirical research about writing centers. Here are some topics:

- From the early to mid- 1980s—think, for example of Stephen North's very famous, "The Idea of a Writing Center" (1984)— tutors have been admonished to help students develop skilled writing processes rather than focus on improving a single product. Unfortunately, little data-supported research about development of writing processes has been conducted in writing centers. Process-focused research would be complex in its methodology, longitudinal, and yield large amounts of data. But process-focused research—even with its difficulties—could be very valuable in connecting tutoring strategies to learning outcomes.
- We should further investigate tutors' roles as conversationalists and providers of safe places. Research about motivation is readily available in educational psychology and social-cognitive psychology (for example, see Bandura 1997) and is becoming more common in writing center publications.
- That tutors should put less focus on grammar instruction and more focus on invention and other higher order concerns is now firmly established as practice in writing centers.
- The use of sentence combining to improve writing abilities has also been thoroughly considered in writing studies research. Findings indicate that although sentence combining exercises may increase students' syntactic maturity, they do not necessarily improve the quality of students' final products (Phillips 1996).

Overall, I believe it is obvious that from its earliest issue, even in its practical studies, *WCJ* has reflected and reinforced ongoing research concerns in our writing centers.

These are the article titles from a recent issue of *WCJ*. As mentioned previously, it is volume 36, issue 1, 2017. The editors were Michele Eodice, Kerri Jordan, and Steve Price. The issue has six articles (two more than in 1980), that cover 178 pages (133 more pages devoted to peer-reviewed articles than in the 1980 first issue). Three of the six articles report empirical studies.

These are the article titles, authors, and brief summaries:

*"*Unmaking Gringo-Centers*"*—Romeo García.

This conceptual study focuses on topics of race and power and how they have been addressed in writing center scholarship. Garcia points to the emergence of a white/black race paradigm and argues that it limits the efficacy of anti-racist argumentation, particularly in its lack of attention to Mexican-American student writers. Garcia used text-mining software to find the most influential keywords and the most influential contexts in 30 years of articles from the Writing Center Research Project database. This part of the study is replicable. However, the review of the articles, which forms the heart of the study, is not replicable.

Closing the Grammarly® Gaps: A Study of Claims and Feedback from an Online Grammar Program—J. M. Dembsey.

This study compares the comments generated by Grammarly, an online grammar program claiming to complement writing center tutoring, to the feedback from 10 asynchronous online tutors on three course-placement essays from first-year writing. With this methodology, the researcher likely intended for the study to be empirical, and I accept that designation with some reservations about the development of the coding scheme. However, probably the best take away from this article is practical—the attention the researcher brings to Grammarly as a probably flawed online option for students who cannot get to the writing center.

*"*Looking Up: Mapping Writing Center Work through Institutional Ethnography*"*—Michelle Miley.

This empirical study discusses the benefits of institutional ethnography and provides an example study the researcher conducted at her own institution to uncover the lay of the land shortly after she was hired. The goal of institutional ethnography is to "map" how writing center work coordinates with and affects and is affected by other work being done within an institution. The researcher begins with her position and zooms upward and outward to show how the writing center administrator's role and responsibilities are shaped by the larger institutional context. The qualitative methodology used in this research incorporates interviews, surveys, observations, focus groups, and textual analyses.

> "Tell Me What You Really Think: Lessons from Negative Student Feedback"—Mary Hedengren and Martin Lockerd.

This practical study investigates negative feedback received on students' exit surveys from 11,000 writing center conferences. Searching for patterns, the researchers examined the few negative comments in the corpus. A key finding in the study is the prevalence of negative comments regarding what the researchers term "non-directive non-productivity" (131): students' perceptions that some conferences guided by principles of non-directiveness improve neither their product nor their process. I classify this study as practical rather than empirical because the method does not appear to be very systematic. The researchers treat the negative responses they collected as examples rather than data.

> "Consulting with Collaborative Writing Teams"—Kathleen M. Coffey, Bridget Gelms, Cynthia C. Johnson, and Heidi A. McKee.

This practical study includes a limited survey of a marketing class in the College of Business at Miami University to determine the characteristics and importance of team projects. The discussion is primarily concerned with how to work effectively with these teams. Hence, it seems more practical than empirical.

> "Context Matters: Centering Writing Center Administrators' Institutional Status and Scholarly Identity"—Sherry Wynn Perdue and Dana Lynn Driscoll.

The article based on this empirical study is a follow up on an across-writing centers survey Driscoll and Perdue published in 2015. In this second article, the purpose is to determine writing center administrators' institutional status and how that status affects their research productivity. The survey had 133 administrators from a variety of writing centers as respondents, and 15 volunteered to be interviewed. Both survey and interview data were coded to identify themes, and those themes were discussed by focus groups. The researchers concluded that tenure-track status had an important effect on administrators' scholarly productivity.

Here are some comparisons between *WCJ*'s 1980 first issue and the first issue published in 2017 and suggestions for research based on the articles summarized:

- Although it is not new in other fields, the institutional ethnography reported in this issue is an expansion of our methodological tool kit. Ethnography, with its thick description of people and events, allows us to "go deep" into particular places and situations and the accompanying power structures.
- A number of articles published since 2005 in *WCJ* report empirical research about directive/non-directive tutoring and share similar conclusions (for examples, see Corbett 2011; Dinitz and Herrington 2014). My suggestion is to settle this discussion now. If non-directiveness (scaffolding) leads to vague advice and students become frustrated and confused, then directiveness (telling or suggesting) is preferable. If directiveness encourages tutors to take over control of students' drafts or shuts down students' learning, then it is inappropriate. At the least, this is a good guideline.
- As Muriel Harris and Kathleen BlakeYancey suggest in their 1980 article, writing center tutoring has indeed been extended to departments across campuses and beyond.
- We are finally beginning to conduct empirical investigations of the responsibilities, salaries, and professional opportunities for writing center administrators.

2.0 Frequency of Empirical Research in *WCJ*

Having examined the first issue of *WCJ* and volume 36, issue 1 2017, let's now look at the frequency of empirical research published in *WCJ*. What percentage of peer-reviewed articles reporting empirical research did *WCJ* publish from 2005 until 2017—a period of 12 years?

Here is a line graph showing the percentage of articles reporting quantitative or qualitative research *WCJ* published from 2005 until 2017. I excluded special issues, so the numbers represent only one issue in some cases. Another anomaly, volume 35 has three issues, and the empirical studies from all three are included in the tally. Most issues published four to six peer-reviewed articles. Because the number of

articles varied from volume to volume, I used percentages to allow comparisons.
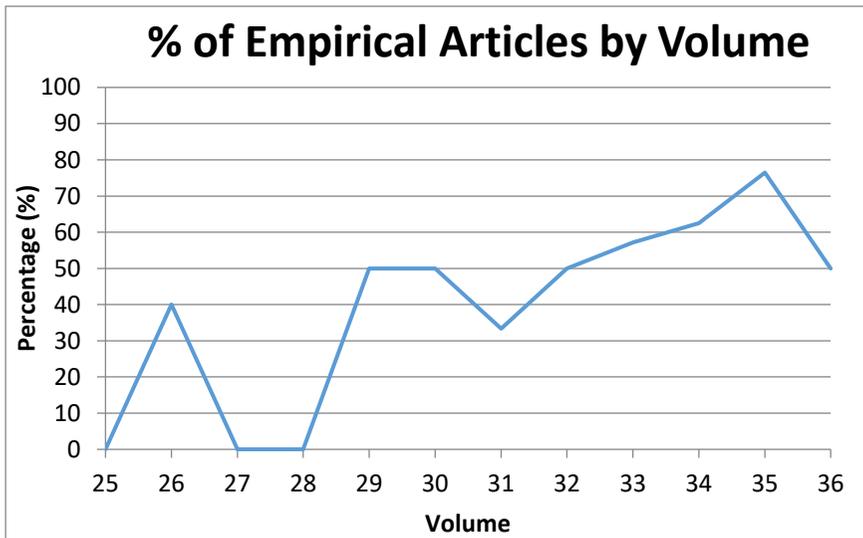

Figure 1. Empirical Articles in *WCJ,* Volumes 25-26

As you can see, a sustained increase in empirical research published in *WCJ* began with volume 29 and, after that, publication of empirical research articles went below 50% percent only in volume 31. The two issues that compose volume 31 contain only six articles, of which only two reported empirical research. On the other hand, a tidbit not visible on this graph is volume 35, issue 3 where all six articles report empirical research. It seems clear that publication of empirical research in *WCJ* has generally increased over the last eight years.

3.0 Topic Categories of Empirical Research Published in *WCJ*

So publication of empirical research has increased in *WCJ*. But, what has the empirical research been about? Reviewing the empirical articles published from 2005-2017, I identified 11 topic categories, with some articles classifiable in more than one category. To keep the length of this article reasonable, I will review only four of those topic categories. I am sure that anyone trying to replicate my topic categories not only would have difficulty not only identifying those I found but also would uncover some I did not see. Again, I am reminded of the importance of systematic coding and of working with a partner.

3.1 Assessment as research

This could be an opportunity to fulfill two responsibilities at the same time for some writing center administrators. In reality, however, I suspect that research publication requires more time and energy than assessment alone. A particularly useful article for those struggling with assessment and those interested in quantitative research is "'By Turns Pleased and Confounded': A Report on One Writing Center's RAD Assessments," by Scott Pleasant, Luke Niiler, and Keshav Jagannathan, *WCJ* 35.3, 2016.

The research reported in this article is entirely quantitative and demonstrates clearly the problems with obtaining statistical significance—differences between groups of scores that do not occur simply by chance. Even when one group of raw data is to the eyes obviously larger than another group, the differences between the two groups may not be statistically significant at an acceptable level.

3.2 Added benefits of writing center work for tutors

This research points to the added value writing center tutoring and administrative work can provide for graduate and undergraduate students. Surveys, questionnaires, and interviews are primary means of gathering this information. Some researchers have developed "thick descriptions" of beyond-writing-center benefits for peer tutors (Hughes, Gillespie, and Kail 2010), while others have surveyed graduate student administrators about the mentoring they received from directors and directors about graduate students' performance as administrators (Rowan 2009). In addition, one researcher used quantitative and qualitative data to determine possible future benefits of her tutor training course (Driscoll 2015).

3.3 Tutoring international students

The articles in this topic category are mostly case studies, sometimes comparing writing or requests for feedback (Severino, Swenson, and Zhu 2009) from second-language English speakers with that from first-language English speakers. Others looked at vocabulary acquisition and word choice errors by L2 speakers (Severino and

Deifill 2011; Severino and Prim 2015). One particularly interesting case study compared drafts and final versions of 10 documents submitted by a second-language English writer to an online writing center over a two-year period (Severino and Prim 2016). This was the only longitudinal study of writing development I found in the *WCJ* database. Anyone interested in conducting empirical research using L2 writers should consult Carol Severino's excellent articles.

3.4 Tutors' roles

Research about tutors' roles comprised the most frequently investigated topic category I found. Some of the research in this category is entirely qualitative, for example, the qualitative discourse analysis of tutors' "footing"—that is their stance—in conferences (Brown 2010). Some is entirely quantitative—for example, a survey that allowed correlations of students' and tutors' perceptions of their behaviors with satisfaction. The behaviors studied have been commonly discussed in writing publications, for example, who talked the most, how directive were the tutors, were the students' questions answered (Thompson, et al. 2009). And some researchers incorporated both qualitative and quantitative data analyses. The tutors' role category includes a range of different studies important for determining the most effective tutoring strategies. Other topic categories include the following:

- Across-site studies of writing centers
- Analysis of articles in *WCJ* as a corpus
- Exit surveys and tutors' notes after conferencing
- On-line tutoring and grammar programs
- Writing centers for special populations
- Status and satisfaction of writing center administrators
- Students' reasons for using writing center services

Do these topics leave room for future research? The answer is "yes." We could be much closer to developing best practices if we could aggregate data on tutoring strategies, and we would be able to make more convincing arguments to administrators if we had more studies about the effectiveness of our tutoring services and about the additional benefits undergraduate- and graduate-students gain from their work in writing

centers. We also need to know more about the responsibilities, educational level, pay, and research interests of writing center administrators. In other words, we need to understand what is going on in our own writing centers, and then as a few researchers are doing, we need to get beyond the local level in our empirical investigations. Here the importance of replicable and aggregable research—which we currently do not have—becomes clear.

4.0 Conclusion

By conducting research, we become better writing center administrators and tutors. By getting in close to students and thinking about their thinking and recording and analyzing tutor and student talk and by analyzing our surroundings and the records and documents we produce, we develop as professionals. By publishing our findings, we enhance not only our individual status but also the prestige of our profession. Besides possibly bringing respect for our work, empirical studies and increased research productivity in general may bring more funding. Along with composition and writing-across-the-curriculum programs, we want to find a place at the writing studies table. I suggest at the head.

In addition, conducting research may feed our curiosity and enhance enjoyment of our important work. It can breathe new life into old ways of thinking, help us reconsider current practices, and relieve the boredom of doing the same things in the same way time after time. Empirical research is a good way to strengthen our minds and brighten our days as well as meet the practical demands of our jobs.

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