

# **POINTS OF DEPARTURE**

*Rethinking Student Source Use and Writing  
Studies Research Methods*

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## Interchapter 1

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### WHAT DO WE MEAN BY TRANSCONTEXTUAL RAD RESEARCH?

*One of the most powerful motives of quantitative researchers is the desire to publish representations of the real world that can be challenged . . . [and therefore] to publish quantitative research takes, among other things, courage.*

—Richard H. Haswell (2012, 191–92)

Many researchers in writing studies resist quantitative research because they feel unprepared in statistical methods or lack the time required to learn and then conduct such research. This worry is hardly new, though. It has been repeatedly articulated by those struggling to develop research methods since the earliest days of our national conferences and journals (see Serviss, introduction to this collection). Members of our discipline, particularly WPAs, often employ qualitative or quantitative research, or a combination of the two, in response to local institutional need, but when those local questions are answered, they move on to the next issue. Sometimes they share their findings through conference presentations or publications in the same way compositionists have traditionally shared locally based ethnographic or text-based research; however, too often all they do is write and file a final report. Frequently, they do not share their results more widely. The (re)turn to quantitative research in recent years has brought with it the renewed hope that such research will be shared—and shared in a way that helps us answer more global questions about writers, writing, and our work between and beyond local, singular sites.

Such RAD-conceived research is developed with other contexts and applications in mind, expecting replication and expansion. For this to work, it is crucial that we share methods to invite others into the inquiry

and thereby generate the refinement that comes with reproduction and expansion of a study. Instead of researchers sharing a brief description of methods to frame their findings, RAD researchers share methods for an additional reason: for replication and expansion. Making methods transparent, however, often takes courage because of reasonable fears that the method will be challenged and the results questioned as readers dismiss the project entirely rather than considering the larger, ongoing goal and suggesting ways to revise the method accordingly. These fears are all too familiar to many students, but as they prepare to submit drafts we, their supportive writing teachers, encourage them to trust readers to be active participants in the writing process, to be co-inquirers who recognize that thinking evolves through constructive feedback. In this collection, we editors argue that RAD research in writing studies should be treated the same way; sharing research methods ought not be small acts of courage but part of a shared effort to understand student writing better and challenge unhelpful assumptions that can emerge from limited observation and formulaic expectations.

Conceptualizing RAD research this way means pilot studies are not just spaces to “try out a gamut of dimensions with a few participants or texts in order to trim hypotheses and variables,” as Richard Haswell (2012, 194) puts it. Instead, they are opportunities for research to emerge—along with the refinement of methods and initial analysis of provisional data that are in turn generative of additional research. That sharing can take the form of publication, as did Howard, Serviss, and Rodrigue’s (2010) study of patchwriting (see Jamieson’s discussion of the evolution of that pilot study in chapter 1 of this collection), or conference presentations and workshops like those used by the LILAC Project to refine their study (see Blackwell-Starnes and Walker’s description in chapter 2). Both these research projects evolved from other studies they revised and replicated; however, it isn’t just this replication that makes these studies significant as RAD projects. Equally important is the acknowledgment of the processes of method refinement across sites and time. This premise—that research is a process as much as writing is a process—challenges part of the RAD paradigm. For example, advocating for RAD research, Haswell recommends newer researchers start by replicating existing studies because the “design and statistical procedures are already established” (194). We resist that stance in this collection, arguing that the relationship between researcher and design must remain dynamic and responsive in writing studies RAD-oriented research. The emergent stances adopted during pilot studies ought to continue. (A pilot study inherits the etymology of the word *pilot* that

includes pilots as leaders of expeditions, piloting a vessel through dangerous terrain, as well as pilots as experimental trails designed to be revised and refined. Pilots are complicated and crucial—not just objects to deploy but processes that teach us about research itself.)

Committing to a responsive approach means approaching all research as recursive and contextual processes. Engaged researchers may even find themselves recoding data beyond the typical pilot phase (as shown in chapters 1 and 2). Such an approach generates more reliable findings and also opens the possibility of further adaptations, apparent in the various research projects extending Citation Project research (see chapters 3–5). It is within this paradigm of mindful research that we call not just for replicable, aggregable, data-driven studies but also for studies that adopt transcontextual research approaches presented in this collection.

#### DEFINING TRANSCONTEXTUAL RAD RESEARCH

Within the context of their article, *Limits of the Local: Expanding Perspectives on Literacy as a Social Practice*, Brandt and Clinton (2002) ask literacy-studies scholars to revise their studies of literacy as social practices happening translocally across and within several contexts simultaneously, accounting for a transcontextual sense of literacy. We editors extend their paradigm of transcontextual literacy studies in this collection, suggesting that this idea of trancontextuality is not just applicable to local literacy studies but is also a valuable way to think about writing studies research itself. We extend Deborah Brandt and Katie Clinton's call to transcontextuality and argue that researchers should apply this idea of trancontextuality not only to our thinking about how writing happens but also to our research projects and findings. A transcontextual orientation toward research asks scholars to imagine not only literacy practices as transcontextual but also research studies themselves, including individual studies. We contend that locally situated writing studies research continues to be valuable for local problem solving, and sharing it *beyond the local* origins of the project is equally valuable; presuming that research is useful beyond local contexts creates generative connectivity that dissolves isolationist tendencies across research contexts, fostering the expansion and strengthening of our cumulative understandings of writing while also remaining mindful of contextually specific differences.

The term *transcontextual*, as Brandt and Clinton (2002) use it, refers to the “limits of the local” and the importance of studying socially situated literacy practices with an understanding that literacies are both

local and beyond the local. In other words, literacies happen translocally. Transcontextual literacy practices, they argue, ought to be an anticipated premise in studies of literacies; we argue that the same translocal understanding must be anticipated in the study of source-based writing. Research parameters must be extended to account for *not only* the local but also for the networked and expansive ways source-based writing is developed and practiced. Brandt and Clinton's (2002) approach to literacy studies as the study of transcontextual literacy practices has been embraced in literacy and writing studies quite widely. Many in the field now expect writing studies researchers to account for the translocality of writing practices across different communities, genres, spaces, tools, purposes, occasions, time, and multidimensional contexts. We celebrate this orientation as we ask, what can this transcontextual approach *afford* us as researchers investigating source-based writing?

Transcontextuality, taken from Brandt and Clinton's conceptualization of literacy practices, invites writing studies scholars to value individual research studies as part of ongoing, connected inquiries about writing even when the contexts and sites of research appear initially unrelated. In this context, RAD research in writing studies ought to be continuously evolving rather than simply being reproduced and verified via replication. We describe the research in this collection as *transcontextually oriented* because contributors share their methods in great detail as well as some findings, acknowledging the local context of their research while also imagining its potential value and contribution beyond their local context. We highlight the *transcontextual value* of the research in this collection by (1) presenting studies in relationship to one another and (2) offering their methods as useful not only to the locality that prompted them but as part of Bruno Latour's (1993) "continual progression of inquiry" that transcontextual research enables.

The research projects described and discussed in chapters 1 and 2 became *transcontextually oriented* when their methods and research processes were designed or redesigned to maintain their integrity as they travel beyond original sites. In this transcontextual paradigm, research is designed and presented as emerging from specific places, problems, and needs while also emphasizing that these contextually specific studies exist in dynamic relationships with other research projects and methods in the past, present, and future. A transcontextual research orientation accounts for the local origins of research while also expecting some unanticipated applications and relationships to emerge from a site-specific inquiry. Transcontextually oriented RAD research, then, is research designed to allow for yet-unknown relationships among seemingly

unrelated or disparate research questions, designs, methods, and sites to thrive. As a kind of RAD research, transcontextual projects embrace transparency and explication of research processes specifically so others can synthesize, connect, or mobilize them to develop theories about writing; yet those research projects themselves may typically be imagined as discrete and original because of their local contexts.

In this way, transcontextual research can compel us to move from mere replication toward loftier goals for our research as networked and translocally influential *by design and transparent presentation*. To create research traditions and communities that work transcontextually we must embrace two premises.

1. Research is a set of processes that are recursive and reiterative; like writing, research is never *finished*. Acknowledging, circulating, and appreciating such developing research is an important part of RAD research traditions.
2. Research emerging from failure, refined by disciplinary conversation, and documented through its adolescent development is *as valuable* as research presented only after maturation. In fact, a transcontextual orientation urges researchers to imagine *all research* as in the midst of awkward adolescence, sets of working methods that help us study and theorize about how writing happens.

#### RETHINKING RAD RESEARCH THROUGH THE TRANSCONTEXTUAL

Our understanding of translocal and transcontextual methods dovetails with traditional notions of RAD research, which has, at its heart, the ideas that data can be collected from more than one site using the same method and that as a result of replicating the method, researchers can compare aggregated findings across contexts. A transcontextual orientation expands RAD by valuing the findings of those local sites in and of themselves in addition to their importance as part of a larger data set. Chapter 1 shows what happened when Citation Project researchers applied a revised version of the method developed locally by Howard, Serviss, and Rodrigue (2010) to student research papers from sixteen institutions. The data from the single-site study revealed a total lack of summary, yet when the method was refined and developed into a transcontextual study, the researchers found some summary in the collected student writing (Jamieson and Howard 2013). This discovery led to the revision of some initial conclusions drawn by Howard, Serviss, and Rodrigue (2010) while also confirming that study's larger conclusion that when working with sources, students write from the sentences in the source. The most

revealing way to study student source use was studying that activity across a wide range of intentionally disparate contexts—institutional contexts, regional contexts—brought together by the commitments of researchers to explore and connect those local data sets and analyses in synthetic ways.

We see a similar connection between local data and research contexts at play in chapter 2, which describes a research project exploring the sources students select and use. The Citation Project also coded sources in a separate study (Jamieson 2017) and, like the LILAC Group, took the same local study by McClure and Clink (2008) as a point of departure. The Citation Project replicated the coding categories to address other questions about source use (Jamieson 2017), and chapter 2 explains how the LILAC Group took up the same research question and expanded it to ask what students do when they are seeking sources and what they think they are doing. As they developed research questions, LILAC researchers also drew on findings from transcontextual research by Project Information Literacy (PIL), as did the research described in chapters 4 and 5 of this collection. This development of research within the context of a dynamic web of relationships between isolated local studies and already translocal and transcontextual research exemplifies the kind of transcontextual RAD research we are proposing.

Unlike the Citation Project, the researchers in the LILAC Group developed an initial pilot study at a single institution but with an eye to both the translocal forces at work and ways the project could be expanded to other institutions. The chapter leaves those researchers in the process of making refinements to and expanding on their project but also concludes by suggesting other research that could “spin off” from the initial study. As researchers attend to the multiple and intersecting literacies always already embedded in a research site, these kinds of networks and new directions for research emerge. Chapter 2 provides a narrative of the work of the LILAC Group, showing how it expanded from other research and making it possible for others to join, replicate, or revise the methods it shares. It also demonstrates the rich possibilities opened up by transcontextual RAD research.

The kind of transcontextual RAD orientation we propose in this collection, illustrated by chapters 1 and 2, positions the shared results and methods of local and pilot studies not as reports of finite truth but as points of departure for further and perpetually ongoing research. We call on researchers who publish valuable local (qualitative and quantitative) studies to share their research processes and methods with this transcontextual orientation in mind, allowing others to treat local pilot

studies translocally while also refining them toward reproducibility and expansion. Understanding emergent local research and pilot studies in this way, as part of a process that makes space for deeper and broader understanding, means that sharing possibly imperfect initial studies ought not require bravery but should be celebrated as part of a process that is itself the sustenance of writing studies research.

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