Theory, Lore, and More:  
An Analysis of RAD Research in  
The Writing Center Journal, 1980–2009  

by Dana Driscoll and Sherry Wynn Perdue

About the Authors

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In the last fifteen years, writing center scholars have increasingly called for more evidence to validate our practices. Articles by Paula Gillespie (2002), Neal Lerner (2009, 2010), and Isabelle Thompson et al. (2009) underscore this need. Missing from these discussions, however, is a thorough understanding of our past and current research practices. This article seeks to fill this gap by 1) tracing a short history of writing center research within the context of methodological changes in the
field of rhetoric and composition; 2) conducting a comprehensive analysis of research articles published in *The Writing Center Journal (WCJ)* from 1980 to 2009 using Richard Haswell’s 2005 paradigm for replicable, aggregable, and data-support (RAD) research; and 3) offering examples of RAD research within *WCJ* and suggestions for producing more RAD research.

This project evolved from conversations between the coauthors—one facilitating a research-supported writing center and the other teaching a research-supported tutoring course—when we found ourselves struggling to demonstrate the efficacy of common writing center practices. It wasn’t that we necessarily disagreed with common wisdom, often offered as anecdote or lore, but that we wanted to answer the inevitable questions, How do we know this? Why does it work? To answer our query, we conducted research on writing center research. We chose *WCJ* because it is the only peer-reviewed professional journal with article length-manuscripts in the field. It represents a growing body of scholarship and research about writing centers and therefore offers an excellent representation of the kinds of research published within writing center studies. Our article-by-article assessment allows us to determine the degree to which *WCJ* has offered evidenced-based practice in the form of RAD research. Further, because *WCJ* represents writing center studies, we argue that our study demonstrates the degree to which the field has offered RAD research within its publications.

**Background and Significance**

While some iteration of writing centers can be traced back to the 1890s (Lerner, 2010), we mark the field’s emergence with the launch of two important publications, *The Writing Lab Newsletter* (1977) and *The Writing Center Journal* (1980). Until that time, the writing center largely was understood as a site of remediation for its parent discipline, composition, which was in many cases still overseen by its parent, the English (literature) department. It is not in the purview of this essay to pursue an extended discussion of composition’s early years as the stepchild of English; this case is laid out in James Kinneavy’s *A Theory of Discourse* (1971). It is important, however, to acknowledge
the way cultural capital or disciplinary power has played a role in the relationship between composition (and later writing center studies) and the social science research model.

To appreciate the concept(s) of research that have shaped writing center studies and proliferated in WCJ, we first examine how composition scholars have defined research, a history lesson that reveals methodological rivalries. While debate over a methodology can be seen as a healthy sign of growth, it can also reflect assumptions that will undercut a field. In Composing Research: A Contextualist Paradigm for Rhetoric and Composition (2000), Cindy Johanek argues that how we debate, not the existence of debate itself, is more important to this professional conversation about research (1). In her view, scholars have created false distinctions between types of research (such as the division between qualitative and quantitative data) rather than pursuing a contextualist approach.

Following Johanek, we argue that the selection of a research method is just like any other rhetorical decision; it should fit the audience, purpose, and the project. Unfortunately, history reveals a series of methodological displacements; rather than adding more methodologies to the research toolbox, it appears that disciplinary gatekeepers at different moments have attempted to elevate some methods and to exclude others as outside the purview of English, composition, and later, writing center studies. If, as our examination of history suggests, some methodologies—particularly empirical methodologies—became targets of strong criticism during the late 1970s and early 1980s, many contemporary compositionists and writing center researchers were potentially discouraged from learning how to use empirical methods, whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods.

A Short History of Research in Composition

While this history is by no means exhaustive, it highlights critical moments in composition and later writing center studies that have influenced what counts (and does not count) as research, the first of which we deem the age of traditional research, heralded by Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer (1963). In Research in Composition, a review
of composition scholarship from the early twentieth century until 1962, they made a case for composition as science and mapped a research agenda full of “instruction-oriented quantitative studies” (Smagorinsky, 2006, 3). In his role as the first editor of *Research in the Teaching of English*, Braddock challenged composition to pursue the legitimacy accorded to the sciences and advocated research on writing that was “characterized by the qualities that distinguish investigations in the hard sciences: reliability, validity, and replicability” (Smagorinsky, 1-2). This trend toward experimental/quasi-experimental research persisted largely unchallenged until the late 1970s/early 1980s (Smagorinsky, 3; Hillocks, 1986).

Unwilling to equate research and legitimacy with quantitative methods, some compositionists employed qualitative methods in the late 1970s and early 1980s: Donald Graves (1979) used case studies, Linda Flower and John Hayes (1981) turned to speak-aloud protocols, Shirley Brice Heath (1983) explored community literacy via ethnography, and Nancie Atwell (1987) advocated reflective practice. Increased qualitative scholarship was not the only factor contributing to the methodological debate. These new practices reflected the emergence of identity politics and the growing influence of poststructuralism in academe (Smagorinsky, 12). The works of Derrida, Foucault, DeMan, and Bakhtin, founded on semiotics and poststructuralist theory, encouraged English literature and composition scholars to resist what they claimed as the objectivism in data-driven research. While critics rightfully argued that the method should fit the question and the audience, many advanced an implicit (later explicit) assumption that social science methods were not adequate to the task.

Of great importance to contextualizing our study is the growing discomfort that composition researchers expressed about early quantitative research, which some decried as positivist (Herrington, 1989, 127). Patricia Bizzell (1979) and Robert Connors (1983), for example, argued that composition was the terrain of the rhetorician and the humanist, not the scientist. They and others, including Janet Emig (1967, 1971, 1982), Donald Graves (1980), and Martha King (1978), argued for a broader definition of composition studies than that which solely investigated the classroom, and they argued that
research should more specifically investigate context (Herrington, 1989, 128). While they made necessary and viable arguments for considering social and economic contexts ignored until the 1970s and 1980s, their critiques tended to characterize many forms of research with a wide brush, a trend that continues today.

**Writing Center Scholarship**

As composition has struggled to define its concept(s) of research, so the field of writing center studies has struggled to define itself as a legitimate discipline. After thirty years of peer-reviewed scholarship, the formation of multiple regional writing center associations, and the establishment of the National—now International—Writing Centers Association, there are more writing centers and more professionally trained composition scholars than ever before (Wallace and Wallace, 2006). Nonetheless, many writing centers continue to be staffed by graduate students and faculty “transplants” from English literature programs, more directors are trained in the humanities than in the social sciences, and many balance both departmental and writing center appointments (Nicolas, 2008; Wallace and Wallace). Because writing center studies emerged when both English literature and composition began to resist empirical research, particularly quantitative methods, we suggest that the field has internalized this dis-ease to some degree, which is reflected in the research we produce.

In her introduction to *Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation* (2002), co-editor Alice Gillam acknowledges that the predicted promise of writing center scholarship has yet to be realized (xv). As such, she argues, we need “more explicit talk about what we mean by research, what should count as research, and how to conduct research” (xv). Gillam identifies two types of research in the center: empirical inquiry and conceptual inquiry. Similar to the history of composition we have mapped, Gillam associates early composition research with empirical inquiry. She argues that early writing center researchers like Stephen North followed Braddock et al. in urging writing center researchers “to move beyond reflections on experience, speculations, and surveys toward systematic assumption-testing empirical studies” (xviii). This call was largely unheeded, which she
attributes to the fact that most writing center administrators were humanities scholars who found “unsystematic, descriptive, and practice-based” research to be “more congruent with their everyday work in writing centers” (xviii).

The heavy workload, limited prestige, training gap, and methodological uneasiness can result in what Jeanette Harris deems “this-is-what-we-do-at my writing center” scholarship (2001, 663). While it is often marketed as research and inhabits a substantial place in WCJ, this kind of scholarship offers little more than anecdotal evidence, one person’s experience, to support its claims. Following Steven North, Paula Gillespie calls this scholarship “Lore” (2002, 39) and suggests that, “If we think of research as ‘the making of knowledge,’ then we must ask the question: What kinds of knowledge are we making, and for whom?” (40). In addition to Gillespie’s question about knowledge production and audience, we embrace her co-editor’s question, which has become the impetus of our project: “What counts as ‘good’ or worthwhile research and by what criteria do we make such judgments? What role has research played in defining our professional identity?” (Gillam, 3).

RAD Research

As we have demonstrated, debates over methodology characterize the history of composition and writing center studies. Richard Haswell poignantly demonstrates in “NCTE/CCCC’s Recent War on Scholarship” that this debate over what constitutes research has negatively impacted composition studies. Haswell opines that NCTE and CCCC have declared war on scholarship identified as “empirical inquiry, laboratory studies, data gathering, experimental investigation, formal research, hard research, and sometimes just research” (200) and in so doing have created a professional climate in which our discipline fails to produce evidence-based research to document the efficacy of its practices. Perhaps more damning is Haswell’s claim that “a method of scholarship under attack by one academic discipline in the United States but currently healthy and supported by every other academic discipline in the world does not need defending” (200). In other words, by resisting RAD research, composition—and writing
center studies within it—has positioned itself against every other discipline, maintaining that it cannot credential its practices in the same way that other fields do.

To demonstrate his claim, Haswell shares the results of his search for RAD research about such highly endorsed composition practices as peer review (though he excluded articles that addressed peer review in writing centers). While his search yielded 514 texts, only eleven articles in thirty years were from NCTE/CCCC publications (212). He further explains that the general decline of RAD he documents in NCTE/CCCC publications over the last twenty years “is not paralleled in other academic disciplines” (215).

This startling finding should challenge us to ask who conducted and published those other 502 studies. Are scholars within our discipline testing the efficacy of our best practices, or are scholars outside the field doing so for us? Texts such as the *Handbook of Writing Research* (2006), an anthology of research into composition teaching and learning to write, for example, include more scholarship penned by education and psychology scholars than by compositionists. Only five of the fifty-three *Handbook of Writing Research* contributors were identified with English departments; none were affiliated with composition, rhetoric, or writing centers.

**Method**

This section describes our method of inquiry, including our research questions; the process by which we selected, analyzed, and coded the articles; a discussion of the two authors as representative readers; and our data analysis techniques. A statistician was consulted on the study design and assisted in the analysis.

**Research Questions**

The following questions guided our study. We were interested not only in the amounts of research and RAD research published in *WCJ* but also in research trends over the journal’s thirty-year history.

1. How much research has been published in *WCJ*? How has this changed over time?
2. How much research published in *WCJ* is RAD research? How has this changed over time?

3. How do *WCJ* articles score in individual areas of the RAD Research Rubric?

4. What are the most common methods of inquiry, types of research, and number of participants for empirical research studies published in *WCJ*?

**Terminology**

For the purpose of this study, “research” refers to any article that includes the use of human subjects, data support, and/or other examination of external data sources (such as tutor evaluation forms or tutor training manuals). In the spirit of Haswell’s definition and Johanek’s work, we maintain that research can be qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. “RAD” research refers to research that is replicable, aggregable, and data supported. Haswell defines these terms as follows: “RAD scholarship is a best effort inquiry into the actualities of a situation, inquiry that is explicitly enough systematicized in sampling, execution, and analysis to be replicated; exactly enough circumscribed to be extended; and factually enough supported to be verified” (201). As Haswell demonstrates in his article, and as this study demonstrates, not all research that uses data can be classified as RAD. We use the term “lore” to describe articles that provide some evidence or data, but that do not fit into the above categories. These articles are typically personal or reflective in nature.

**Sampling and Coding**

We made the decision to read *all* articles contained within *WCJ* rather than sampling articles from the journal and to use *WCJ* as a sample for the larger field of writing center studies. (Sampling refers to selecting an appropriate group or sample to study.) While reading all articles required substantially more work, it revealed a much richer dataset and rendered a more complete picture of *WCJ*’s history. While we maintain that *WCJ* is an excellent representation of the field, the choice of *WCJ* for our dataset precludes research published in other venues.
To answer our research questions, we recognized the need for two levels of analysis. The first classified article types published in WCJ, allowing us to identify which articles fit the “research” category for further analysis. The second examined articles for trends over time and the amount of RAD research present, allowing us to answer our four research questions.

To categorize, or code, each article, we began by each reading through one issue for every four years. (Coding refers to how information is organized into categories.) After independently reading and categorizing this sample of journals, we compared categories and developed an article category rubric, which provides definitions for each article type, which included theoretical, practical, research, program description, historical, review, professional, reflection, position statement, and interview. In this way, we allowed the journal articles themselves to speak to us in a grounded-theory method rather than attempting to fit articles into predetermined categories. Because articles often fell into more than one category, we coded them with a primary category and up to two secondary categories. Note that the “research” category found in our article category rubric includes both RAD and non-RAD research. (These categories were distinguished in our second level of analysis, the RAD research analysis.)

After completing preliminary article analyses, we independently coded all articles published in WCJ from the inaugural 1980 issue (Volume 1, Issue 1) to the end of 2009 (Volume 29, Issue 2), the last issue published before we began our study. This gave us 29 years and 272 articles after excluding editor’s notes and bibliographies. Of the 272, we omitted two reprints of previously published articles from volume 23, issue 2 (2003), already accounted for in the analysis, which yielded 270 articles. After independently placing the articles into categories, we compared results. We agreed on article categorization 94.8% of the time; any initial disagreements were discussed and resolved. It was important for us to agree 100% of the time so that we could select the appropriate articles for the RAD Research Analysis.

RAD Research Analysis

We identified 91 of the 270 articles as “research articles” that contained
at least some form of research—data collected from either human participants or data gained from other materials (such as a textual analysis of multiple textbooks or consultant notes, etc.). For some articles, research results were the primary focus whereas for others, research was a smaller part of the article. We adapted Haswell’s method of rating the studies by way of a yes/no designation by creating a multi-item rubric with a high/medium/low scale in multiple areas. The rubric allowed us not only to examine RAD research in a more detailed manner but also to determine in what areas writing center research is strong and in what areas research may be lacking. To create the rubric, we jointly examined Haswell’s “Definition of the Categories of RAD and Non-RAD” table (208) and divided it into five initial categories: background and significance, study design and data collection, selection of participants and/or texts, presentation of results, and discussion and implications. We each pre-tested the rubric by independently reading through five randomly selected articles that contained research. Then we met to refine the rubric, which resulted in two additional categories: method of analysis and limitations and future work.

Our final RAD Research Rubric is displayed below. In keeping with the spirit of Haswell’s work, we composed a rubric that allowed for qualitative and quantitative data to be equally classified as RAD research. For example, under “selection of participants,” a quantitative study may discuss a sampling frame for a survey; in a qualitative study, a researcher may discuss how case study participants were chosen and their representativeness to other students. The maximum RAD research score is 14 (achieving a 2 or a high score in all seven areas), and the minimum score is 0 (achieving a 0 or low score in all seven areas). We set 10 as the cutoff for studies to qualify as RAD research, with those “approaching” RAD research as 7. We choose a 10 as the criterion because an article had to score a “high” in at least three of the seven areas to earn a 10.
RAD Research Rubric

Area 1: Background and Significance

*High* (2): Clearly situates the study within the context of the field and previous literature, identifies the gap addressed by the work, and provides timely references to recent scholarship.

*Medium* (1): Provides some study contextualization and uses references, but discussion may not be thorough, timely, and detailed and may lack important information.

*Low* (0): Little or no relevant research related to the study is discussed, little to no contextualization and/or little to no discussion of a gap addressed.

Area 2: Study Design and Data Collection

*High* (2): Methods are detailed enough that study could be reliably replicated in a new context. Methods section describes data collection, gives justification for methodological choices and how those choices relate to the study objectives, and identifies and describes research questions or hypotheses. Researchers make methodological choices that do not introduce bias into data collection, analysis, and description of results and/or make justifiable attempts to address and control for bias.

*Medium* (1): Some methodological description is present, but discussion lacks details in several of the categories (objectives, study design). Researchers may not provide justification of methodological choices but still present enough information about methods that replication could occur.

*Low* (0): No method section present, or methods described are so vague that study could not be reliability replicated.

Area 3: Selection of Participants and/or Texts

*High* (2): Selection of participants or texts is clear and justified. For surveys, quasi-experiments, or experiments, selection includes a discussion of random selection or sampling technique. For case studies, interviews, observations, or other qualitative work, description of the participant selection and representativeness of participants is present (i.e., participants are randomly chosen...
or chosen to represent a specific background, such as an ESL student). For textual analysis, a description of the selection process and sampling is clear and detailed.

Medium (1): Some discussion of the selection of participants or texts is present although information is unclear or incomplete. Justification of selection choices may not be present.

Low (0): Insufficient or no description and justification of participant or text selection.

Area 4: Method of Analysis

High (2): Method of data analysis is clear, is fitting of the study design, and is meaningful. Categories of analysis and operational definitions are presented and described. Researchers provide evidence that analysis was done in a systematic manner.

Medium (1): Method of analysis is fairly clear and systematic, but missing detail in one or two key areas. It may not contain justifications.

Low (0): Insufficient or no description of the method of analysis. Researchers give no indication that analysis was done in a systematic manner.

Area 5: Presentation of Results

High (2): Results are presented in a clear and accessible manner. Results are supplemented by appropriate graphics, excerpts from texts or interviews, or other evidence. Results are presented in a manner that clearly separates them from discussion/opinions of the researcher.

Medium (1): Results are presented accurately, but there may be some confusion or areas where the results are unclear or are not supported with appropriate evidence. The distinction between results and discussion may be unclear in parts. Biased language in results may be present (for example, value judgments or interpretations of what participants were thinking rather than actual observed behavior).

Low (0): Insufficient description of results and/or results presented in a confusing, obtuse, or biased manner. No clear distinction between results and discussion is present.
Area 6: Discussion and Implications

*High* (2): Authors provide a clear description of how the results of the research contributes to the field’s understanding of the issue and how the current study informs, complicates, or extends previous work (if any). Authors provide clear implications of the study and discuss broader applications of the results.

*Medium* (1): Authors provide some discussion of the results of the work within the context of the field, implications, and applications of the results, although parts of this discussion may be missing or lack sufficient detail.

*Low* (0): Insufficient and/or no discussion of implications or broader applications.

Area 7: Limitations and Future Work

*High* (2): Researchers give clear suggestions for future work that they or others may pursue relating to the study results and provide clear acknowledgement of study limitations.

*Medium* (1): Researchers give some suggestions for future work and some acknowledgement of study limitations. Overstatements about the value of the work may also be present.

*Low* (0): Insufficient discussion of study limitations or future work.

In addition to coding each research article using the RAD Research Rubric, we coded data type, inquiry topics, and participant numbers (if applicable). To analyze type of research data collected, we used the following categories: qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, and unknown. If the research included any amount of both qualitative and quantitative data, it was classified as mixed methods, so the relative amounts of qualitative or quantitative data were not considered. We also kept track of the number of authors, journal editors, and total number of participants to provide a larger picture of the research that took place and for necessary statistical controls in our analysis.

*The Researchers as Readers*

We drew upon our own strengths and diverse backgrounds as readers
of the articles, which we believe strengthened this analysis. Sherry, a writing center director with a humanities background in literature and composition, is relatively new to empirical research. She came to the readings with the perspective of someone interested in research for its uses in the writing center and functioned as an excellent example of the primary audience for *WCJ*. Dana is a Writing and Rhetoric faculty member who teaches the university’s Peer Tutoring in Composition (tutor training) course and has a background in quantitative and qualitative research methods in the social sciences. She approached the readings as a social scientist and as a faculty member looking for evidence-based practice to sustain her tutor training course.

**Inter-Rater Reliability**

For the RAD research analysis, we independently evaluated each research article to better represent the diverse readership of *WCJ*. Despite the differences in our backgrounds, 80.2% of our scores were within one point of each other and 89% of our scores were within two points. No scores were more than four points apart (on our 0-14 point scale). Once we had completed our independent ratings of the 91 research articles, we took the mean (average) of our two scores in each rubric area creating a single score, and this became the score upon which we based our data analysis.

**Data Analysis**

All data were entered into a spreadsheet and analyzed using PASW 18 (formerly SPSS). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies (the number of articles in a particular category), means, and medians (mid-points in the data) were calculated. To understand trends in RAD research, we plotted the 91 articles on a graph using a visual technique called a scatterplot (Figure 2 in the results section) to which we applied a LOESS Smoothing Curve, a line that allowed us to see trends in RAD research over time. Because our curve showed a mostly linear pattern, it was appropriate to conduct a simple linear regression analysis to measure statistically significant differences in RAD Research scores. This included a test to determine how the type of research (qualitative, quantitative, mixed method) influenced the
amount of RAD research published.

Results

This section describes the results, broken down by each research question, of our 270 article analysis.

How much research has been published in WCJ? How does this change over time? WCJ publishes a wide variety of articles. As demonstrated in Figure 1, we discovered that theoretical articles, those that present an argument, frame, or new way of seeing, represented the largest article category (32.2% or 87 articles). Following that, research, including both RAD and non-RAD, made up 25.9% (70 listed as the primary category, with another 21 as a secondary category). Individual issues ranged from including no research-based articles (19 issues, or 34.5% of the total articles published) to upwards of 70% or more research-based articles (6 issues, or 10.1% of the total articles published). The amount of research published has remained fairly steady over time. However, we found substantial differences in the amount of RAD research published over time, as described below.

How much research published in WCJ is RAD Research? How have the amounts of RAD research changed over time? Overall, very little research published in WCJ would fit RAD criteria. The mean score for the 91 research studies was a 4.5 on our 14-point scale. The median point is 3, which means that 50% of the studies we examined had a 3 or lower for the total score. Fifteen studies, or 16.5%, scored a 10 or better, meeting our criteria for RAD Research. Another 11 articles (or 12.1%) scored a 7, a score that indicates that they do have some elements of RAD research. While these numbers appear low when compared to the overall number of research-based articles, perhaps the most important finding is how these numbers have changed over time.
To understand changes over time, we charted the total RAD article scores over time (measured in years) and applied a LOESS smoothing curve, as described in the methods section above. As the scatterplot indicates (Figure 2), the overall amount of RAD research has increased substantially over time. We see gradual improvement in the early days of the field (1980-1985). After 1985, the rate of RAD research scores for published articles published has increased at a steady rate.

A second important finding, also demonstrated in Figure 2, is that the RAD research scores improve over time, even among the lowest scoring articles. After 1992, no articles received a RAD research score of 0, and later years demonstrate further score increases.
How do WCJ articles score in individual areas of the RAD Research Rubric? We calculated a mean score for each RAD research category to determine in which areas WCJ articles excelled and in which improvements were needed. As we point out above, individual areas of the RAD Research Rubric each had a possible rating of 0-2 points. Figure 3 provides the mean scores for each area, the entire duration of the journal, and the scores for the last ten years.

The Background and Significance category had the highest mean score (0.91 for all years); presentation of results and discussion and implications also had high scores overall. The two lowest areas were Limitations and Future Work at 0.34 (all years) with only slight gains for the last ten years (0.57). As Figure 3 demonstrates, research conducted in the last ten years improves in all RAD rubric areas.
What are the most common methods of inquiry, types of research, and number of participants for empirical research studies published in WCJ? Of the 91 research articles, 63.0% (58) used only qualitative data, 13.0% (12) used only quantitative data, 17.4% (16) collected both qualitative and quantitative data, and 5.4% (5) of the articles analyzed were unclear in the types of data collected. A regression analysis revealed that the type of data was an important indicator of the RAD research score. Articles that used only quantitative data or contained both quantitative and qualitative data were rated significantly higher than the overall RAD research score for all research articles (\(p<.000\)). Of the 91 articles, 58 (or 63.7%) indicated the number of participants (for studies which had participants), and one study was a textual analysis that had no participants. Of those 58, participant numbers ranged from 1-3050; the mean number of participants was 128. Specific methods of inquiry in all research-based articles (RAD or non-RAD) varied widely, with surveys, analyses of student/tutor writing, and participant-observations being the highest categories (see Table 1).

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**Figure 3: RAD Research Rubric Areas**

![RAD Rubric Scores Graph](image-url)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Number of Articles</th>
<th>Percentage of total articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of Student/Tutor Writing</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant-Observation</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spoken discourse analysis</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online discourse analysis</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quasi-experiment (no randomly assigned</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participants)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of Student/Tutor produced images</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiment (randomly assigned participants)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Type of Research Methods

**Discussion**

While *WCJ* has published many articles that discuss data, we would classify only sixteen percent of its articles as replicable, aggregable, and data-supported research. The amount of RAD research published over time, however, reflects the development of writing center studies as a discipline. In the 1980s, *WCJ* published relatively few RAD research studies. As time passed, more RAD research studies were published. Despite this positive trend, the overall number of RAD articles—articles that demonstrate research-supported best practices—is quite low. Clearly, the story of RAD research in *WCJ* is one of yet-to-be-met potential.

Based on these findings, we recommend serious shifts in how writing center scholars conceptualize, conduct, compose, and support research. These suggestions go beyond changes in the organizational style of manuscripts (although this is part of the process of producing
better RAD research). We argue for a revised definition of research and its relationship to our practices and publications. While there are those who would argue that this is not necessary or appropriate for a writing center audience, the field must embrace such change to validate our practices and to secure external credibility and funding and to develop evidence-based practices.

To guide this transformation, we advocate 1) fortifying our knowledge, 2) developing replicable and aggregable research methods, 3) envisioning broadly and making connections, 4) shifting our expectations as both readers and researchers, and 5) sponsoring research. We illustrate our recommendations with the assistance of four WCJ articles that use RAD Research, each with a different approach. These include a qualitative study by Terese Thonus (2001), a mixed-methods study by Karen Rowan (2009), a quantitative study by Irene Clark (2001), and a study by Isabel Thompson et al. (2009).

Fortifying our Knowledge

While one could infer that writing center scholars have abdicated the responsibility to document the efficacy of our practices, it could be that an education gap is at play. Historically, many writing program administrators (WPAs) and writing faculty (particularly in higher education) have been trained in humanistic inquiry with research concepts and methods that differ from those outlined in our RAD Research Rubric. For example, English departments like the one in which Sherry was trained refer to multi-source articles with theoretical frames as research, and it is not uncommon for English publications to cite one teacher’s account of a new approach grounded in a theoretical tradition and discussion of its effects as “evidence” of success. This was clearly the case in many WCJ articles, even those that used human participants. Researchers in most other fields refer to such evidence as anecdote. In sum, much humanities scholarship is written about the individual whereas social science researchers focus on the group (Lauer and Asher, 1988, vi).

While theories often shape articles in the sciences and social sciences, these theories are developed through RAD research, and their authors are expected to present evidence to demonstrate their
validity. Further, humanities-trained WPAs—in spite of these different traditions of what counts as evidence—increasingly are asked or take it upon themselves to provide information about their programs and their students’ performance to audiences who expect information to be presented in the traditions of social science research. Isabelle Thompson et al.’s “Examining Our Lore: A Survey of Students’ and Tutors’ Satisfaction with Writing Center Conferences” provides an example of a study designed to directly examine the efficacy of lore-based mandates to avoid directive tutoring. It provides an excellent example of presenting evidence to test a theory (79). When RAD methods are used, we sometimes find that the lore is not supported by the data, which affirms our need to redress program assumptions.

If writing center researchers are to demonstrate the efficacy of our practices both within and outside our field, those trained in the humanities need to develop a new appreciation for these audience expectations, which means that not only do our publications need to model these methods but also our undergraduate and graduate programs need to teach qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research. To that end, some rhetoric and composition Ph.D. programs currently include research methods’ coursework. Practicing writing center directors could seek to augment their education by taking postgraduate coursework, attending research seminars or institutes, and by collaborating with social scientists and statisticians.

Developing Replicable and Aggregable Methods

One of the most pressing findings of this study was the lack of clear methods that would allow replicable and aggregable follow-up studies. Replicability is crucial to developing evidence-based best practices because it helps a field establish general principles about its practices. Replicability does not mean that research needs to be removed from its local context nor abstracted beyond its use (as Johanek articulates in Composing Research). Rather, it helps us develop multiple situated studies that ask similar questions. Aggregability allows readers to extend a prior study. RAD research includes designing and describing studies through clear methods, participant selection, and analysis, so we can build upon prior studies and engage
in a discussion sustained by research and data-supported practices. Haswell reminds us that when “there is no system by which to sample, elicit, and analyze student responses, there is no easy way to replicate or extend the author’s findings. Nor is there any adequate way to compare . . . data with previous data, because the parameters needed to make comparisons fair and meaningful are almost entirely lacking” (202).

Three sections from our rubric take on prime importance when considering replicability: the study design and data collection, the participant and/or text selection, and the analysis methods. As our results indicated, these are two of the lowest scoring areas and demonstrate a serious need for more attention. As a symptom of our need to pay more attention to this area, we point to our finding that, in 34.1% of the research articles, the number of participants was not provided or could not be inferred from the text. This piece of information—so basic and crucial to replicability yet lacking in so many studies—is a clear indicator of our need to pay more attention to our methods.

Even qualitative pieces need descriptive information about methods of data collection, participant selection, and analysis. In “All the Best Intentions: Graduate Student Administrative Professional Development in Practice,” Karen Rowan (2009) examines graduate student mentorship and administrative issues within a mixed-methods piece that includes survey and interview data. Her article provides an excellent example of a replicable methodology section. She clearly identifies her study population, recruitment approach, and method of analysis, and she discusses relevant scholarship that influenced her methodological decisions. This information does not disrupt Rowan’s ability to tell the “story” of her participants and their experiences, but rather it draws attention to how the story is framed with RAD criteria in mind.

**Envisioning Broadly and Making Connections**

To encourage RAD research, we need to shift our view from seeing research as a series of isolated, individual studies. Rather, we need to envision broadly and make connections—through RAD research—
among issues of importance to the field. Although we did not quantify or assess the kinds of citations that researchers used, we independently noticed a pattern in our readings. It seemed that two different conversations were taking place—one that cited research studies and one that drew upon long-standing lore-based arguments. When we rely primarily on longstanding lore without making connections between previous and current research-supported practices, we are unable to develop evidence-based practice. Furthermore, the lowest scoring area of the RAD Research Rubric, the limitations and future work area, demonstrates a lack of forward thinking (and critical analysis of one’s research) on the part of past WCJ articles.

Irene Clark’s study, which questions the validity of exclusively employing non-directive tutoring pedagogy, uses a post-conference survey to present an excellent example of a broadly envisioned study. In framing her research, Clark examines longstanding writing center lore and demonstrates how her three research questions are clearly rooted in previous scholarship. Likewise, Terese Thonus examines the relationships between seven pairs of faculty, tutors, and tutees in a qualitative study. After thoroughly describing her participants, method of analysis, and results, she frames her work as evidence to support “anecdotal observations by writing center personnel” (77). Despite the broad and connected thinking of these high-scoring studies, especially in framing the background and significance sections, neither describes with any detail potential areas for future study.

In our rubric, we looked for studies that were clearly situated within the context of the field and previous literature, identify the gap addressed by the work, and provide timely references to recent scholarship, and we believe this criteria serves as a good suggestion for literature reviews to help broaden the scope: connected thinking can also help inform our choices of data collection and analysis, presentation of results, and discussions of our results.

**Shifting our Expectations as Researchers and Readers**

As Kinneavy’s *A Theory of Discourse* explains, all communication is based on a transaction between the encoder (writer), the decoder
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(reader), the signal (text), and reality (19). Our suggestions thus far have been focused entirely on the researchers and discussions of their studies. However, much of what researchers are able to present depends upon the expectations of their audiences—which is why we made some authorial decisions in this article that deviate from what readers might have come to expect. Although we are mindful that WCJ has a long history of using MLA citation style, we include dates within the first use of each new citation, making readers privy to the currency of cited scholarship within the running text, which also allows them to see how conversations about research are constructed over time. These modifications of MLA style should not been seen as a preference for APA style but rather as an informal proposal for an MLA research hybrid that encourages authors to better meet the readers’ needs.

In addition to the potential efficacy of including dates within our research texts, we suggest that readers consider the implications of the highly significant statistical difference we found between RAD research scores for qualitative and quantitative articles and how it was correlated to format. While the RAD Research Rubric allowed for high scoring in both qualitative and quantitative work, and while some of our highest scoring articles were qualitative, we found in reading these articles that quantitative articles were more typically presented in a research format. Qualitative research using human participants is often presented as a narrative or story, typically lacking details that would allow the reader to replicate and extend the work. (This is especially true in the areas of participant selection and data analysis.) It is possible that this finding demonstrates an underlying assumption about how qualitative and quantitative research is read and discussed within our field. But, as our discussion of Rowan’s work has described, it is possible to tell a good story and still write RAD research.

Sponsorship

In addition to revisiting how writing center publications traditionally frame the story of research, we must ask whether the upward trend we have mapped in WCJ indicates a growing sponsorship of RAD
research in the field. When Haswell asked a similar question of composition’s signature organizations, he found that the dearth of RAD research in NCTE and CCCC publications was not reflected in other publication venues. That is, RAD research on writing was being done, but it wasn’t being solicited by or published in NCTE publications (209). While it could be that an education gap or disciplinary preference explains the low RAD scores in WCJ, it also could be that more RAD research is being done in writing centers but simply is not appearing in WCJ. These are conditions that this study could not measure. While we have demonstrated that RAD research in WCJ is slowly increasing, it is clear that we need more sponsorship of RAD research to build the case for the efficacy of writing centers and to develop evidence-based practices.

**Study Limitations**

While we attempted to create a study that was itself replicable, aggregable, and data-supported, several limitations were present in our work. First, we attempted to read for content rather than organization, regardless of whether or not articles fit the standard “research article” format. This was challenging because articles written in a standard research format were clearer, such as when authors separated results from discussion. Additionally, we tried to read each category in the RAD Research Rubric independently of the other categories. However, this was also challenging as an incomplete or missing study design means that the presented results are harder to rate because a reader is unsure about how that data was collected and analyzed. By having two separate readers and averaging our scores, we attempted to control for these issues. While we see the difficulty in rating research presented in a non-research format as a limitation in our study, we also recognize that these limitations arise from a deeper issue about reader expectations.

A second limitation is that our analysis provides only a representation of these articles as they appear in published form. We have not collected data on the editorial process, including the input of reviewers and editors on these manuscripts. As our conversations with previous WCJ editors have indicated, complex interactions, interactions that shape assumptions about what audiences expect
or need from research, take place prior to publication. The pre-publishing aspects of how research is written and modified to fit the needs of the audience offer an excellent avenue for future work.

Conclusion

As the results suggest, most of what has been published as research in WCJ is not replicable, aggregable, and data supported; in other words, it does not meet the test of what other disciplines define as evidence-based research. While writing center researchers have not yet made RAD research our standard output, this study has also indicated that the amount of RAD research we produce has increased over time, particularly in the last ten years. It is likely that writing center practitioners can appreciate the role of RAD research because they are in the position of having to justify their programs and budgets to educational administrators and faculty across the disciplines who expect research-supported evidence. If writing center researchers are to better represent the efficacy of our practices and if we are to influence the way that we teach and talk about writing across the disciplines, we must speak a common research language, one that allows others from both within and outside of our field to retrace our steps and to test our claims. As our history of our field demonstrates, we must not only revisit our discussion of research diversity; we must embrace RAD research as a language for future of writing center publications.

Much more work is needed to understand the complex relationships between writing centers practitioners and how we produce and discuss our research. We need more research on the education, training, and support writing center directors receive to conduct RAD research. We need to understand the place of tutor-driven research and ask how tutors can contribute to these ongoing conversations about our practices. We also need more research on the research process: How do writing center researchers plan and undertake studies? How is research funded and/or sponsored? Asking and investigating such questions and re-envisioning our relationship to research will help us develop more RAD research-supported practices and move our field into the future.
WORKS CITED


Rowan, Karen. “All the Best Intentions: Graduate Student Administrative Professional Development in Practice.”


Rowan, Karen. “All the Best Intentions: Graduate Student Administrative Professional Development in Practice.”


NOTES

1. We owe special thanks to Reuben Ternes for his invaluable statistical knowledge. We are also grateful to Neal Lerner, Linda Bergmann, Allen Brizee, and two anonymous reviewers for their encouragement and insightful comments on this manuscript and to attendees of the 2010 International Writing Centers Association conference, particularly Muriel Harris and Terese Thonus, for their feedback on the presentation version of this manuscript.

2. Our project commenced in 2009; our findings reflect research through volume 29, issue 2.

3. While some might claim that this status is reserved for *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, which was first published in 1977 and whose articles are now juried, its articles are not generally of the same length and depth of academic journals. We do not deny, however, the importance of this resource within writing center studies.

4. Grounded theory, developed by the sociologists Glaser and Strauss in 1967, emphasizes using the data itself to generate analysis categories for the data rather than having researchers apply pre-existing theories or frameworks.

5. We calculated this score by totaling the number of articles (n=270) and divided this number by each instance of disagreement (14 instances).

6. A linear regression analysis is an inferential statistical technique applied to data that has a linear pattern, which helps determine if the relationship between two variables is statistically significant.

7. This number is offset by one large 3000+ person study of post-tutorial surveys. Of the 58 articles, 15 studies had more than 100 participants (25.9%), and 26 studies had less than 10 (44.8%).

8. This analysis uses only primary dataset or the dataset that was discussed the most within the article. Thirty-five studies included at least one secondary dataset.

9. This finding is confirmed by Lerner (Nov. 2010) who showed that theory-driven articles continue to be the most cited pieces in WCJ.