

Book Review

Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field

Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook. 1987

by

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Many of us, teachers and researchers, want to expand our thinking about composition by reading varied research, but find ourselves feeling intrigued yet overwhelmed by the array of research methods in the reading. Currently, several studies compare some of the multiple modes of inquiry being used simultaneously throughout the field of composition. Most often the focus is primarily on the relative merits of experimental and naturalistic research, thus preserving the assumption that only methods derived from the social sciences are appropriate ones and preserving the notion that teachers, or practitioners, as North calls them, are recipients not makers of knowledge in the field. Stephen North's book is one of this genre — yet it is also significantly different: Rather than taking a comparative stance, asking proponents of different approaches to make their cases, he enters into the worlds of the many modes on inquiry himself, presenting a comprehensive view.

His purpose is to make sense of the "methodological landrush," as he calls it, that started in the 1960s, and since has proliferated into so many modes of inquiry that they vie for our attention and compete with one another in contests of validity and appropriateness for the study of writing. Composition is still a new field, thus North feels such methodological diversity, though it enriches the field, can strengthen it only if we are informed about the different methods and can bring about a rapprochement among them. Otherwise, he warns, this diversity will splinter the field (itself a splinter), leaving its fragments in other disciplines.

North accounts for these many modes of inquiry by grouping the methodological communities that use them into three major categories: practitioners, scholars, and researchers. The section on Practitioners recognizes that much knowledge has been and continues to be generated by teachers and transmitted mainly by oral means into a considerable body of lore: The other two major categories account for the dual position of composition in both the humanities and social sciences. The section on scholars

discusses the methods of knowledge-making traditionally associated with the humanities: historians chart where we are now by looking longitudinally at where we've been. Philosophers explore our premises, logic, and conclusions. Critics examine texts, using perhaps a hermeneutical method to probe the consciousness of a given writer: The corresponding section on researchers contains methods associated with social sciences. Experimentalists look for relationships between isolated variables in order to infer universal principles. Clinicians study writers doing preset tasks in restricted settings. Formalists build models. And finally, ethnographers try to understand the "imaginative universe" of a particular social context, such as the classroom.

For each research approach he outlines the typical procedure used to investigate a problem, provides detailed analyses of research or scholarship exemplifying it, and comments on its strengths and weaknesses: though he provides steps in the investigative strategy of each ("First, identify the problem. . ."), this elaboration never appears to be a lock-step account of method so much as a means of inviting us to compare different modes of inquiry. Such detail encourages us to move beyond oversimplified maxims of comparison, such as distinguishing experimentalism from ethnography by characterizing the former as hypothesis-testing and the latter as hypothesis-generating. Similarly, instead of presenting the methods as if they developed in isolation, he shows the cross-influences of the research methods on one another. He calls into question, for example, whether ethnography really needs corroborating evidence from "triangulation," asking whether this is perhaps a quasi-experimental notion we have imposed on it. So throughout each discussion of method we see both its characteristics and its cross-influences.

While he provides thoughtful discussions of the individual modes of inquiry and their interconnections, he also explores the implications of each kind of knowledge-making for the field as a whole. Always, scholarly/research/practitioner questions are placed within the context of current political influences. He asserts, for example, that we tend to scapegoat practitioners, holding this group responsible for literacy problems, and he also suggests that the predominance of the experimental method encourages us to regard other modes of inquiry as less valid.

This book has some notable strengths that set it apart from similar reviews of inquiry methods. He recognizes the primacy of practitioners and the pervasiveness of knowledge this group generates: As he humorously puts it, like members of a colonized territory it refuses to abandon its religion. And he acknowledges that our field has roots deep in the humanities and shows the value of such scholarship: in particular, the section on hermeneutic inquiry, exemplified by North's own work, is a useful account of a method of making knowledge new to our field.

Of course the book also has its shortcomings. In producing a work of this breadth he often sacrifices depth. While he carefully analyzes and exemplifies pertinent research, he uncovers little of the *roots* of the different modes of inquiry before we adopt them from other disciplines. This omission is particularly evident in his section on the hermeneutic method: in it he ascribes its origins to literary studies. Yet this shallow account distorts the method, since it mentions nothing of its roots in the philosophy of phenomenology and the serious consideration it is currently being given in the social sciences (see *American Psychologist*, October 1985, and others). Similarly, in his discussion of the philosophical approach in general, and the work of Ann Berthoff in particular, he regards philosophical scholarship as "foraging" ideas from other fields, failing to see that philosophical perspective underlies and orients our work in both research and practice.

Still, his work succeeds in comprehensively examining the many ways of making knowledge in Composition, noting how these ways effect one another and the field as a whole. It is an intelligent book directed towards an informed audience of both researchers and teachers—all of us wandering in the thicket of competing methodologies—and his conclusions never lapse into cliché. In a tone often informal and sometimes frankly opinionated, he interweaves formal analyses of pieces of research with illustrative anecdotes. And he writes with a consciousness awareness that composition is a field in flux. At a time when our field is taking stock of its modes of inquiry, this book recommends our attention.