

1-1-2000

## Review: Composing Research

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### Recommended Citation

Carino, Peter (2000) "Review: Composing Research," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 1, Article 7.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1472>

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## Reviews

**Johanek, Cindy. *Composing Research: A Contextualist Paradigm for Rhetoric and Composition*. Logan, Utah: Utah State UP, 2000.**

*Reviewed by Peter Carino*

Cindy Johanek's *Composing Research: A Contextualist Paradigm for Rhetoric and Composition* argues as its central thesis that composition and writing center scholars have installed narrative as their dominant research method to the exclusion of other valid methods. Reminding readers that narrative is only one way of delineating context, Johanek calls for a multi-modal approach to research on both writing classes and writing centers, an approach that would value quantitative methodologies equally with the qualitative methods she finds in vogue. She traces the tendency of composition scholars throughout the past decade to dismiss and even impugn research based on statistical models, defining the field's fascination with narrative as a problem against which to recuperate quantitative research as a powerful means of enabling researchers to refine and elaborate the contexts in which writers compose. In short, this is the old art versus science debate contextualized in contemporary composition, but Johanek wisely avoids an either/or argument, refusing to advance the tired and naive claim of bad statisticians that quantitative research gives us "The Truth." Rather she regards quantitative research as a tool that can help composition researchers make generalizations in the face of the field's "chaotic individualism through which we amass a body of scholarship we are ultimately unable to contain, describe, or in the end use" (205).

Johanek convincingly establishes the problematic nature of composition's penchant for qualitative research, in the form of narrative case studies, observation, and simply "story telling." Citing influential books such as Elbow's *What is English?*, calls for papers from NCTE and CCCC conferences, and a shift in the editorial policies of *Research in the Teaching of English (RTE)*, the field's prestige journal in quantitative studies, she portrays a body of scholarship that not only has privileged research based on narrative but that has worked hard to marginalize

research based on numbers. Johaneck points to several texts that openly disparage quantitative research while employing narrative methodologies and other texts that while using quantitative research feel compelled to apologize for it. She locates the roots of this tendency in composition researchers' general fear of and lack of training in mathematics and in their "preference for writing that is more creative and literary than the standard research report" (57). Though a feminist herself, she also demonstrates how essentialist feminism has assigned gender to epistemologies, viewing narrative as open, fluid, and feminine, and statistics as assertive, containing, and masculine. Add to these the anti-foundationalism of postmodernism both in literature and criticism, and Johaneck's accusations of number bashing are corroborated.

Having identified a problem and established its causes, Johaneck attempts to remediate the field by demonstrating how research methodologies need not be dichotomous. Indeed the book itself, as whole and in individual chapters, blends personal narrative with demonstrative quantitative studies to illustrate the very kind of research it calls for. The first of the three quantitative studies—a whimsical but statistically sound testing of whether a red bowling ball is more effective than a purple or green one—is woven through several of the early chapters to introduce the reader to the power and limits of statistical research. This study provides a primer and preview of another demonstration in which Johaneck tests the hypothesis, and common myth in the field, that students do not like teachers to mark their papers in red ink. These two frame a third and much longer study by Eileen Oliver, originally published in *RTE* (December 1995), that questions whether rhetorical specification in writing prompts makes a difference in the writing quality of students at three different levels of schooling. Oliver's article is interspersed with commentary by Johaneck and reflective e-mail conversations between the two women.

This multiple-voiced chapter is instructive and also yields a serendipitous benefit that Johaneck may not have intended. Quoted in its entirety, Oliver's study by itself is at times the kind of deadening reading that has driven composition scholars to prefer, justifiably I would argue, more narrative modes. Written in the distanced and impersonal style of feigned objectivity that plagues much education and social science discourse, it is vivified and made tolerable only by Oliver's reflective commentary in the e-mail exchange with Johaneck, making one wish that the conventions of *RTE* had allowed Oliver to present her convincing statistical analyses in the same humanly engaging tone evident in the e-mails. But that is exactly one of Johaneck's key points, and one she deftly exemplifies in the study of students' feelings about red ink: research and research discourse can be multi-modal, and statistical research particularly can be enlivened and made relevant by a more human voice while narrative reflection can be undergirded by statistical data. The two need

not be exclusive and when blended have the potential to create a discourse particular to the contexts in which composition researchers find themselves.

With training in the social sciences and statistical methods, Johaneck clearly enjoys numbers but avoids the reductive stridency in asserting their validity that sometimes characterizes less imaginative scientists and bean-counting administrators while putting off humanists. Terms such as “hard data” or “statistical facts” are avoided, and Johaneck acknowledges that statistics are limited in the number of variables they can test. Nevertheless, she unflinchingly takes the field to task for having rejected a valuable way to ask questions and construct knowledge. While affirming that every field needs researchers with the insight, wit, and self-irony of a Peter Elbow, she forcefully counters in a punchy single-sentence paragraph, “But every field needs more than that, too” (15). Johaneck also reminds researchers that in the rich contexts of writing centers and writing programs sometimes one method may be preferable to another depending on the research question. For example, she champions quantitative research as a means of illuminating and testing what she calls “dark knowledge,” the lore compositionists “know” is true because it has been reported and experienced too many times anecdotally to be unfounded. Statistical research applied to such knowledge, Johaneck maintains, can add yet another narrative but one that enables broader generalizations than a collection of individual experiences does.

This book will be refreshing to some. It will make others nervous—not because they reject Johaneck’s more tentative, more postmodern view of the validity of stats, but because they fear that many outside rhetoric and composition will continue to adhere to an epistemology in which statistics are always reliable, narratives always fuzzy. Skeptical readers may argue with good cause that narrative methodologies have emerged partly as an epistemological assertion meant to counter foundationalist beliefs in the primacy of numerical representations of reality—beliefs often held, or perceived to be held, by administrators, legislators, grantors, or anyone else who has the power to affect the practices (and budgets) of writing programs and centers. From this guarded perspective, it could be feared that to embrace quantitative methodology is to validate and capitulate to a naive epistemology. However, a wiser strategy, and the one Johaneck endorses, is to appropriate quantitative methodology as one of many ways of knowing—in other words, to find its proper place. Such a move might serve not only to enrich composition research but also to help educate those who see quantitative research as a dominant method rather than one of many, all of which have value and limitations. It will be interesting to see how this book will be received or what influence it will have. Other than a couple of sources Johaneck cites as making arguments similar to her own, she stands with

little support in the path of a composition bandwagon with story-tellers in the driver's seat. It will be interesting to see if the bandwagon has slowed down enough to stop and allow quantitative research a seat.

For writing centers, *Composing Research* is important for two reasons. First and obviously, its thesis is relevant to center scholars as contributors to the larger scholarly project of rhetoric and composition, and writing centers lend themselves to the kind of research Johanek calls for. Second, though addressed to the composition community in toto, the book includes writing centers in the discussion at every turn, according them equal status with classrooms as spaces where composing takes place. I know of no other such book that does so to the extent Johanek's does. Johanek, once an undergraduate peer tutor and today a writing center director, is to be commended not only for the provocative contribution she makes to composition scholarship but for reminding the field that writing centers are an important part of it.

**Peter Carino** is Professor of English and Supervisor of the Writing Center at Indiana State University, where he teaches technical writing and American literature. He has published basic writing textbooks and articles on writing centers, composition pedagogy, American literature, and baseball.