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Georganne Nordstrom

Practitioner Inquiry: Articulating a Model for RAD Research in the Writing Center

Abstract

Following Haswell's (2005) widely received critique of published scholarship in composition studies that pointedly notes a deficit in terms of replicable, aggregable, data supported (RAD) research, recent scholarly efforts in writing center studies similarly indicate an increased attention to both what counts as research in the field and the methodologies we employ in that research (Liggett, Jordan, & Price, 2011; Driscoll & Perdue, 2012; Babcock & Thonus, 2013). In this article, I focus on the call for RAD research in our field and the ways practitioner inquiry, a research methodology commonly used in writing center scholarship, can produce RAD research. I map existing models of practitioner inquiry generated within writing center scholarship with those from other disciplines, particularly education, to highlight commonalities and limitations, examining where we might benefit from adopting certain articulations of approach and process. I then posit a model of practitioner inquiry that merges these models and incorporates elements from other qualitative research methodologies, specifically the concepts of triangulation and transferability, so that application of practitioner inquiry is more likely to produce RAD research.

The Writing Center Journal 35.1 | Fall/Winter 2015 87



When hired as a new assistant professor by my alma mater in 2012, I assumed directorship of the very same center I had worked in as a student. My journey from undergraduate student-tutor to graduate student-tutor to my current position as director—a progression not uncommon among many writing center practitioners—informed a foundational tenet I hold about writing center work: Working in a center contributes to students' professionalization through the acquisition of skills applicable on the job market (whether in or out of academia). My own experience confirmed this premise, and when my first assistant director secured a job directing his own center, I grew even more confident in this presupposition. I also had little doubt that anyone working in a center would actually question my position on this despite that little writing center scholarship provides data-supported evidence regarding the professionalization of student-tutors. I was thus interested in examining my interactions with the tutors and the roles they assumed to explore the ways their work in the center shaped and informed their professional development, as it most certainly had my own.

These observations of the ways working in the center contributed to my and now my students' academic "success" suggested interesting outcomes; however, these outcomes amounted to little more than site-specific anecdote without investigation of other possible contributing factors and data to support my observations. In fact, feedback on a very early paper on this topic confirmed this—what seemed a clear and obvious outcome to me, was not so clear or straightforward to others. Key feedback questions on methods that would ultimately influence the research design of a later iteration of this project included: Could you further develop how you articulated this outcome with your initial observation? What was your thinking process? Why did you choose/how did you identify your data sources? Can you further develop your explanation of how you gathered, recorded, and analyzed data? Were there any factors unaccounted for?

This feedback made it clear to me that recordation of participant-observations alone, while potentially a significant preliminary step in identifying a viable research inquiry, did not result in conclusions that could be generalized even within my own site, much less transferable to other sites, despite that the outcomes were recurring. I needed tools to explain the repeated phenomena; otherwise, they could appear to be coincidence. So, while my observations may make for an interesting read, and may even be convincing to other writing center practitioners who have witnessed similar scenarios, stopping research at this point does not broaden our disciplinary discussion beyond *this is what happened at one point in one center*. Particularly for research based in writing centers,

because our research most often involves people, outcomes can depend largely on an individual's behavior, personal characteristics, etc., not to mention the practitioner's own biases, which may lead to an unintentional skew in interpretation. To balance that kind of variability, methods and analytical approaches need to be concretized as much as possible; otherwise, a scholarly inquiry only makes for a good story.

To move this project from informed speculation to verifiable research, in addition to questions regarding approaches and methods from early feedback, I also needed to consider larger theoretical concerns:

- How do I demonstrate the outcomes aren't a one-time occurrence realized by a few students in a unique setting, but rather linked to practices and repeatable across student populations?
- How do I demonstrate I am not "seeing" data in a way that promotes what I am looking for? In other words, how do I demonstrate the evidence I gathered isn't overly biased by my own positioning/research intentions?

If my goal is to say students are professionalized by their work in centers, both process and outcomes need to resonate with others. To accomplish this, I had to provide enough information so others could potentially identify similarities to their own sites of practice and build upon my work. I felt that this could be important research. Demonstrating that writing centers, in addition to delivering a campus-wide student support, promote student professionalization through the acquisition of skills applicable on a job market could, after all, have a bearing on funding and institutional support. For administrators with backgrounds in different fields, I would need to provide more than an anecdotal, "I've observed this..." story. While that may be a place to start, it simply won't hold water at an institutional level. I would need a methodology that not only supports gathering multiple data, but also provides a frame to document my approach to the research in terms of both data gathering and analysis to support future research directed at verifying repeatability.

My understanding of practitioner inquiry supported the practices that led to my early observations—specifically being a practitioner, observing occurrences in my site of practice, and making conjectures based on experiential inquiry. Unfortunately, however, too often practitioner inquiry is identified as the methodology informing studies that stop there, at the anecdote point. In contrast, scholarship defining practitioner inquiry reveals a much more robust methodology that supports data-supported research. For scholars examining practitioner inquiry in both education (Cochran-Smith & Little, 2009) and writing

center studies (Liggett, Jordan, & Price, 2011) as a methodology, it goes beyond a practitioner in an educational setting observing a problem or practice–outcome scenario. Rather, practitioner inquiry encompasses theoretical approaches for conducting and documenting research as well as practices for gathering and analyzing data. It emphasizes the role of practice in the research, accounts for epistemological stance in approach to research and research subject, and provides a framework for presenting and analyzing the data.

Institutionally, however, the concept of “practitioner” carries some baggage, and in terms of research, practitioner inquiry has often been marginalized and undervalued in the academic arena. I suggest that this marginalization may be the result of a lack of general understanding and articulation of what practitioner inquiry is and what enacting it as a research methodology entails. Too often practitioner inquiry has been used to describe any research produced by a practitioner/researcher, and, unfortunately, some of this research has not foregrounded the systematic rigor or approaches to data valued in the academy. This has resulted in practitioner inquiry research often being trivialized or dismissed as informal research. Dana Driscoll & Sherry Wynn Perdue (2012), for example, critique certain kinds of research often included under the practitioner inquiry umbrella for its subjectivity and lack of data integrity, writing, “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 claim” (p. 16). A closer examination of practitioner inquiry models discussed in the literature (i.e., Cochran-Smith & Little, 2009; Liggett, Jordan, & Price, 2011), however, implicates responsibility, rigor, and integrity on the part of the researcher in approach to methods, data collection, and representation of results. In what follows, I present practitioner inquiry as a research model. In response to the increasing calls for replicable, aggregable, data supported (RAD) research, I explain how practitioner inquiry can provide a framework for meeting the demands of RAD research in its call for systematicity and validity, adapting these and other concepts so that they can be operationalized using qualitative data sources commonly acquired in an educational setting by a practitioner/researcher.

Recent scholarly efforts in the field indicate a particular trend that has significant implications for writing center practitioners and the research we produce: More and more frequently researchers are interrogating what counts as research in writing center scholarship. Sarah

Liggett, Kerri Jordan, & Steve Price (2011) construct a taxonomy of methodologies based on published writing center research; Driscoll & Perdue (2012) evaluate published writing center research, specifically advocating for writing center scholars to produce more RAD research; and Rebecca Babcock & Terese Thonus (2013) similarly advocate for RAD research in their book-length overview of empirical studies and research methodologies. While such works frequently include mention of practitioner inquiry/research as a methodology common in writing center research, little, if any, writing center scholarship specifically notes practitioner inquiry (or practitioner research) as its research design. When practitioner inquiry is noted as a common methodology, it is often relegated as “informal” research (Babcock & Thonus, 2013, p. 18), research that is not generalizable (Liggett, Jordan, & Price, 2011, p. 64), and, while valued as research amongst writing center scholars, it can easily fall into the trap of being little more than “lore” (Gillespie, 2002). These perceptions of practitioner inquiry—perceptions I will argue are limiting—have resulted in this methodology being trivialized when compared to academic scholarship being produced in other disciplines.

Notwithstanding that the prevalent “this-is-what-we-do-at-our-center” construct is often associated with practitioner inquiry, in and of itself this approach does not constitute practitioner inquiry. Practitioner inquiry does provide space for telling our stories, but it also demands practices more closely aligned with empirical research. Too often, however, thorough explication in terms of processes, practices, and data are left out in published research categorized as practitioner inquiry. Yet, taxonomies on research methodologies often site it as a dominant mode of inquiry in our field. Paula Gillespie, Alice Gillam, Lady Falls Brown, & Byron Stay (2002) positioned practitioner inquiry as falling under one of two kinds of writing research—namely empirical (the other being conceptual)—being produced in the field, and almost ten years later, Liggett, Jordan, & Price (2011) elevate it to one of three main research approaches—distinct from empirical and conceptual research—in their taxonomy. This attention to practitioner inquiry in meta-analyses of our research suggests that we are employing it as a research methodology, albeit to varying extents in terms of demonstrating rigor and data integrity.

Despite its prominence in discussions of research taxonomies—and obvious application in various forms in writing center research—searches of the terms “practitioner inquiry”/“practitioner research” combined with “writing center” in several online databases, including CompPile, ERIC, and MLA, turn up zero results. This raises the question: If practitioner inquiry is noted as a common methodology

in surveys of research, why is it not specifically named in the research itself? I suggest one reason for this lack is the absence of a formalized articulation of practitioner inquiry as the methodology underpinning a research model in our field. In this article, I present such a model. In building this methodological framework, I map existing models of practitioner inquiry generated within writing center scholarship with those from other fields, specifically education, to highlight commonalities and limitations, examining where we might benefit from adopting certain articulations of approach and process. I then posit a model of practitioner inquiry that merges these models and incorporates elements from other qualitative research methodologies, specifically concepts of triangulation and transferability, so that application of practitioner inquiry is more likely to produce RAD research.

Before proceeding, it is useful here to define and clarify the relationship between the three key terms I use throughout: research model, methodology, and method. Sandra Harding (1987) clarifies that *methodology* “is a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed” (p. 3), whereas *method* “is a technique for (or way of proceeding in) gathering evidence” (p. 2). For the purposes here, practitioner inquiry is a methodology informed by theories, such as collaboration, and approaches, such as validity and systematicity. Methods, on the other hand, refer to practices enacted in the process of research and should be designed so as to support the claims of the methodology. For example, conducting a case study, performing extensive review of the literature, or administering surveys are all possible methods. Moreover, the specific practices enacted as part of any method—how data is gathered and documented, the way the researcher’s relationship to the research subject is defined, how representations of the research and the researched are analyzed and presented, etc.—must be informed by the methodology. Finally, it is *research model* that refers to the conceptual framework that encompasses both methodology and methods, indicating how methodology informs particular methods at various points in the research process. Importantly, a model also suggests a sequencing in terms of how research should proceed in a very general sense from inception through analysis and presentation of outcomes.¹

1 This does not imply that research proceeds in some static and pre-defined order; for example, recursive practices, which will be more fully discussed shortly, are an essential element of practitioner inquiry, indicating that certain parts of the research process can and should be revisited and reconsidered as often as is necessary to ensure accuracy.

The “Problem” with Our Scholarship: The Argument for RAD Research

In “NCTE/CCCC’s Recent War on Scholarship” (2005), an article that has had long-lasting and far-reaching impact in the field of composition studies, Richard Haswell brought attention to the general lack of RAD research represented in scholarship on teaching composition at the post-secondary level. Haswell roundly critiques our “flagstaff houses,” NCTE and CCCC, saying that while they claim to support a broad range of scholarship, they have systematically denied sponsorship of “empirical inquiry, laboratory studies, data gathering, experimental investigation” (p. 200). Haswell categorizes these kinds of research as RAD research, which he defines as

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. (p. 201)

Haswell’s critique resonated across composition, and previous efforts to document and validate writing center research practices (Harris, 2000; Gillespie, Gillam, Brown, & Stay, 2002), resurfaced as interrogations of the same (i.e., Driscoll & Perdue, 2012; Babcock & Thonus, 2012). Babcock & Thonus (2012), for example, take up the argument for evidence-based research, emphasizing that empirical research can add to the kinds of research long privileged among writing center practitioners: “While theoretical investigations build the foundation for writing center studies, and anecdotal experience points in the direction of best practices, empirical research will create a credible link between the two” (p. 3). In “Theory, Lore, and More: An Analysis of RAD Research in *The Writing Center Journal*, 1980–2009” (2012), Driscoll & Perdue similarly emphasize the need for RAD research in the writing center and advocate identifying frameworks and methods that support it in order to “validate our practices” (p. 29). To rate published writing center scholarship in terms of it being RAD research, Driscoll & Perdue designed a rubric with the following seven elements as areas for evaluation (pp. 20–21):

1. Background and Significance
2. Study Design and Data Collection
3. Selection of Participants and/or Texts

4. Method of Analysis
5. Presentation of Results
6. Discussion and Implications
7. Limitations and Future Work

The absence or limited articulation of many of these elements in a significant body of writing center research resulted in Driscoll & Perdue finding that only 5% of 270 articles published in *The Writing Center Journal* between 1980 and 2009 meet RAD criteria (p. 28).²

If we are looking to answer these calls for more RAD research, clearly we need models. Babcock & Thonus (2012) identify particular qualitative and quantitative methods that they “believe are applicable in writing center research” (p. 3)—unquestionably important contributions to these efforts to support RAD research in our field. And, like others who have produced taxonomies of writing center research, they note practitioner inquiry as one of the most common kinds of research produced in writing center scholarship; however, there is very little attention to it as a legitimate methodology for producing RAD research. Gillespie (2002) has often been cited for describing the knowledge we produce as “lore,” but she also notes that what begins as lore often moves to theory (p. 41). In fact, in all the treatments of practitioner inquiry, there seems to be an overall reluctance to dismiss it as an ineffective methodology despite its shortcomings; after all, such scholarship does inform many of our practices in important ways. I am suggesting, therefore, that if we are to heed Driscoll & Perdue’s (2012) recommendation for “serious shifts in how writing center scholars conceptualize, conduct, compose and support research” (p. 29), we need to, like Thonus & Babcock suggest, articulate research models that accommodate working with data sources consistent with those commonly used in our field—namely qualitative data. But we also need to move beyond getting excited about isolated data sources, like surveys or inferred outcomes from participant observation, for example. While such data can become the impetus for a more robust study, to count as research, a researcher must also identify methodologies and methods to ensure the research model is readily adaptable across sites of practice. A clearly defined practitioner inquiry research model will allow us to en-

2 Driscoll & Perdue determined 90 articles out of 270 published in *WCJ* during that time period could be considered research; of that 90, 16% could be categorized as RAD research. 16% reflects approximately 5% of the total 270 articles.

gage in the kinds of research we find suitable to our contexts of practice, and, at the same time, help us codify our scholarly trajectories, which will have the inter-related implications of 1) legitimizing our work in broader academic discussions, by 2) providing a systematic approach through which the efficacy of common writing center practices can be documented and supported with experiential evidence.

Practitioner Inquiry: Commonalities and Limitations in Existing Models

Practitioner inquiry, broadly defined as research conducted by an individual who also works—or practices—in the site of study, expands upon the concepts promoted in teacher research, a movement that gained traction in the second half of the 20th century.³ Marilyn Cochran-Smith & Susan Lytle have been noted as standard bearers in the field of teacher research, specifically for their award-winning scholarship on practitioner inquiry.⁴ Their sustained engagement with the topic, including their attention and response to critiques, makes their work suitable as a basis for my examination of practitioner inquiry models here.

Noting the limitations embodied in the terminology “teacher research,” Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009), advocate replacing “teacher” with “practitioner”: in *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation*, their “sequel” to *Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge* (1999), they assert that “teacher unnecessarily and inaccurately narrowed the scope” (p. ix). They then provide *practitioner research* and *practitioner inquiry* (the latter will be used throughout this article) as interchangeable umbrella terms that encompass teacher research but are more “expansive and inclusive” in that they refer to “a wide array of educational practitioners” in addition to teachers (p. ix). The broader parameters of practitioner inquiry allow for the adaptation of many of the same teacher research practices and approaches yet also for the acknowledgment of complex multi-directional relationships that can occur in an educational setting, like writing centers. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) also identify *inquiry as stance* as inherent in practitioner inquiry in that it represents “a worldview and habit of mind” (p. viii)

3 Lawrence Stenhouse’s work in England is commonly credited with the rise of the teacher research movement beginning in the 1960s. Ideas associated with the movement garnered significant attention in the 1970s and 80s.

4 AACTE David C. Imig Award for Outstanding Contributions to Teacher Education (2011) for *Inquiry as Stance*.

that prompts the practitioner to continually reflect on practices with the end goal of improving educational outcomes in a specific context (p. 2).

Although little, if any, writing center scholarship specifically notes practitioner inquiry as a research methodology, taxonomical work (i.e., Gillespie, Gillam, Brown, & Stay, 2002; Liggett, Jordan, & Price, 2012) often identifies practitioner inquiry as one of our most common methodologies. I suggest that one obvious reason practitioner inquiry has dominated writing center research as a methodology—albeit an oft unnamed methodology—is simply because our methods of inquiry can easily be mapped onto many of the practices and values articulated with practitioner inquiry as it has been practiced in Education and Teacher Research since the 1960s. Liggett, Jordan, & Price (2011) provide one of the most thorough explications of practitioner inquiry as it is practiced in our field in “Mapping Knowledge-Making in Writing Center Research: A Taxonomy of Methodologies”; the extent of their examination make it an appropriate departure point in my efforts to articulate a practitioner inquiry research model for writing center scholars. Table 1 provides excerpts from their discussion of practitioner inquiry and aligns them with Cochran-Smith & Lytle’s (2009) “Common Characteristics” of practitioner inquiry (written in italics in Table 1) and their corresponding descriptions as applied in teacher education research. In the sections that follow, I will first discuss the commonalities between the two models—both those that are apparent and those that are implied in discussion. Then, I will explain the limitations, noting how further articulation in terms of methodology with method would help build a research model applicable and replicable across writing center sites. This discussion will lay the ground for the last section of this article in which I will present a practitioner inquiry research model.

Table 1: Common Practitioner Inquiry Models as Practiced by Teacher Education and Writing Center Researchers*

Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) Common Characteristics of Practitioner Inquiry	Liggett, Jordan, & Price (2011) Corresponding Characteristics of Practitioner Inquiry
1. <i>Practitioner as Researcher</i> : “The practitioner himself or herself simultaneously takes on the role of researcher” (p. 41).	“Those who engage in practitioner inquiry ... may be administrators, teachers, or peer tutors, but they are also writers” (p. 56).
2. <i>Professional Context as Inquiry Site/Professional Practice as Focus of Study</i> : “The professional context is taken as the site for inquiry, and problems and issues that arise from professional practice are the focus of study” (p. 42).	“Since working with writers one-on-one remains the primary <i>modus operandi</i> of writing centers, [Stephen] North identifies this context as the ‘most obvious setting’ for Practitioner Inquiry: it is where problems find tutors in the writing center” (p. 57). “Pragmatic Inquiry [a sub-category of practitioner inquiry] usually begins with a local, practice-related experience or observation that prompts the Practitioner to engage in research...” (p. 61).
3. <i>Community and Collaboration</i> : “Although some practitioner research is conducted by individuals, collaboration among and across participants is a key feature” (p. 41).	Collaboration is implicated through the important role placed on dialectic exchange that entails, for example, “engaging in discussion with others (such as tutors, student writers, administrators, teachers, and writing center directors)” (p. 62).

Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) Common Characteristics of Practitioner Inquiry	Liggett, Jordan, & Price (2011) Corresponding Characteristics of Practitioner Inquiry
4. <i>Assumptions about Links of Knowledge, Knowers, and Knowing</i> : “The assumption that those who work in a particular educational context and/or who live in particular social situations have significant knowledge about those situations” (p. 42).	“Our community has long valued the experiential knowledge of practitioners” (p. 54).
5. <i>Blurred Boundaries between Inquiry and Practice</i> : “The boundaries between inquiry and practice blur when the practitioner is researcher and the professional context is a site for research” (p. 42–3).	“Practitioner Inquiry, then, is reflexive, experientially based research that relies on dialectic [inquiry] to examine experience [practice] and to arrive at carefully investigated and tested personal knowledge” (p. 58).
6. <i>Publicity, Public Knowledge, and Critique</i> : “Most descriptions of practitioner inquiry emphasize making the work public and open to the critique of a larger community” (p. 44–50).	“Practitioner Inquirers contribute significantly to our research community: they offer knowledge against which other Practitioners test and validate their own understanding, and they publish and present studies that become springboards” (p. 59).
7. <i>New Conceptions of Validity and Generalizability</i> : “Notions of validity and generalizability are quite different from the traditional criteria” (p. 43).	Validity: “Practitioner Inquirers employ reflexive, dialectical means to test and validate their work” (p. 58). Generalizability: “Practitioner Inquirers overstep methodological boundaries if they attach global implications to their findings” (p. 63).

**Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009)
Common Characteristics of
Practitioner Inquiry**

**Liggett, Jordan, & Price (2011)
Corresponding Characteristics
of Practitioner Inquiry**

8. *Systematicity including Data Collection and Analysis:*
“Systematic documentation [can] resemble the forms of data collection used in other qualitative studies [and] entails multiple data sources that illuminate and confirm but also disconfirm one another” (p. 44).

“Pragmatic Inquiry [a sub category of practitioner inquiry] requires a skeptical eye; the researcher must analyze the problem or issue from a variety of angles, especially those that offer opposing interpretations or positions” (p. 61).
To this end, practitioner research may incorporate multiple and varied methods, including engaging with other stakeholders (teachers, administrators, tutors, other practitioners) as well as borrowing methods from other research approaches (i.e., empirical studies).

* For the sake of clarity in the ensuing discussion, I have taken liberty in both reordering Cochran-Smith & Lytle’s presentation of their practitioner inquiry characteristics and numbering them.

Commonalities

The first six characteristics named by Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) (Table 1) align closely not only with Liggett, Jordan, & Price’s (2011) discussion of practitioner inquiry, but with writing center pedagogy in general. Many of these features, such as *Practitioner as Researcher* (Table 1, #1) and *Professional Context as Inquiry Site/Professional Practice as Focus of Study* (Table 1, #2), are similarly hallmarks to practitioner inquiry as practiced in writing center research. And these first two characteristics are intricately related to a specific habit of mind and practice enacted regularly by writing center practitioners: Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) call it “inquiry as stance” whereas Liggett, Jordan, & Price (2011) name it “reflexive stance,” noting it is “crucial to the success” of

the practitioner inquiry methodology for writing center researchers (p. 57). Reflexivity for Liggett, Jordan, & Price (2011) takes on a dialectic form wherein the practitioner continually interrogates and reflects on assumptions and practices within the larger context of experiences and other's knowledge (peers, students, published works, etc.), suggesting a privileging of different knowledge sources and a sense of collaboration in terms of incorporating that knowledge (p. 58). With their term inquiry as stance, Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) similarly emphasize reflexivity and perspective but expand their definition to highlight the political nature of such research: "It is social and political in the sense of deliberating about what to get done, why to get it done, who decides, and whose interests are served" (p. 121). Implicit then is that a practitioner embodying this habit of mind constantly interrogates whose knowledge is valued, and her inquiry thus encompasses ways to counter structures of power that privilege certain ways of knowing and being. While Cochran-Smith & Lytle offer a fuller explication of the stance a practitioner inquirer takes, this kind of interrogation of knowledge and hierarchies of power are inherent to our pedagogy and at the very foundation of writing center studies. For example, fifteen years ago, Andrea Lunsford (1991) discussed the "idea of a writing center informed by a theory of knowledge as socially constructed ... that presents a challenge to the institution of higher education" (pp. 75–76). Indeed, early articulations of our practices like Lunsford's represent the political and disruptive position writing centers can potentially achieve within an institution often mired in constrained ideas about what counts as knowledge and for whom.

Along this same trajectory of breaking with traditional understandings of practice and knowledge within academia, Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) name *Community and Collaboration* (Table 1, #3) and *Assumptions about Links of Knowledge, Knowers, and Knowing* (Table 1, #4) as essential characteristics of practitioner inquiry. Both concepts are implicit in Liggett, Jordan, & Price's (2011) discussion, and like interrogation of hierarchies of power, are foundational to writing center theory. Finally, the concepts *Blurred Boundaries between Inquiry and Practice* (Table 1, #5) and *Publicity, Public Knowledge, and Critique* (Table 1, #6) are actuated in common ways that seem obvious in both fields: The first is an effect of conducting research within one's practice site, with all the benefits and challenges that such a scenario presents; and the second is realized through the volume of publications and conferences in which the research is presented.

I have placed *Validity and Generalizability* and *Systematicity* last on the list because I believe they need the most attention, a discussion I take up in the next section.

Limitations

While the commonalities between the two models of practitioner inquiry, particularly in terms of the first six characteristics (as numbered in Table 1) might seem quite obvious, what is also clear is that Cochran-Smith & Lytle's (2009) articulation of practitioner inquiry more precisely presents as a research model. The authors list eight clearly defined features (theories/approaches) informing the methodology that are shared across modes of practitioner inquiry, each with corresponding definitions and/or methods. In the construction of this model, Cochran-Smith & Lytle have the benefit of a long history of teacher researchers working to validate the research conducted in their field within wider academic circles, which could be one explanation for the model's clarity. Scholarly calls in our own field are demanding we make similar moves to formally articulate research models (Harris, 2000; Babcock & Thonus, 2012; Driscoll & Perdue, 2012) to produce more RAD writing center research. Liggett, Jordan, & Price (2011) provide a cohesive discussion of practitioner inquiry for writing center practitioners, supported by scholarship and examples, addressing a long overdue need for such an explication in our field and thus lay an essential theoretical foundation for any work that attempts to build a research model based on practitioner inquiry—the work I undertake here. A first step is looking at the limitations of practitioner inquiry not only as a research model but also in producing RAD research.

As noted earlier, Driscoll & Perdue (2012) conducted an extensive survey of scholarship to determine how much of our published work could be considered RAD research. They designed a rubric based on Haswell's (2005) table presenting "Definitions of the categories of RAD and non-RAD" (p. 208). Their rubric areas are meant to facilitate a detailed examination of RAD research as well as "determine in what areas writing center research is strong and in what areas research may be lacking" (Driscoll & Perdue, 2012, p. 20). While the articles Driscoll & Perdue examined do not all employ a practitioner inquiry methodology, I used their rubric to help identify limitations to practitioner inquiry. If few research articles reflected an area in their rubric, I assumed that methods corresponding to that area needed to be articulated in my research model.

Driscoll & Perdue (2012) note that the three criteria of their rubric that were most successfully addressed in published research are *Background and Significance*, *Presentation of Results*, and *Discussion and Implications*. The area receiving the lowest score according to their analysis is *Limitation and Future Work*, followed closely by *Selection of Participants/Texts* and *Method of Analysis*. Many of the practitioner inquiry features noted in Table 1 by both Cochran-Smith & Lytle and Liggett, Jordan, & Price could address these specific criteria. I suggest here that some articles' failure to address certain criteria arises for two related reasons: 1) conflation between methodology and methods, which results in 2) lack of detail of methods and their application at different points of the research process.⁵

To better illustrate my point here, I return to Harding's (1987) definitions of methodology and methods: Sometimes the methods (or practices) employed to address a particular methodology (or theoretical frame) are conflated with the methodology itself. When distinction between methodology and method is not clearly articulated, the ways in which a particular method does (or does not) address the goals of a methodology are not readily apparent. Further, researchers can claim to have used a methodology without acknowledging ways their practices may have limited its realization.

For example, the methodology underpinning a practitioner inquiry research model should be informed by theories of collaboration. These theories might be presented as an abstract concept—we know what collaboration is not, but to define what it is too narrowly may restrict all the ways it could possibly manifest. A methodology informed by collaboration, therefore, must be described carefully along with corresponding methods or practices; otherwise one runs the risk of undermining its efficacy in terms of application across contexts. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) do discuss several methods for realizing collaboration; however, adapting their work to the ways collaboration (and privileging different ways of knowing) are practiced by writing center practitioners would clarify the role of collaboration in a research model and increase its applicability across our varied contexts.

Interestingly, the areas according to Driscoll & Perdue (2012) needing the most attention are ones requiring methodical and systematic practices (methods) rather than theoretical discussion and analysis (methodology). As many of us have received our formal training in

5 It is important to note that sometimes these essential details are left out of articles due to space constraints. Defining a model for such research will hopefully also work to address this issue to some degree.

English departments, theoretical discussion and analysis is arguably one of our strengths, which is likely why areas like *Background and Significance* and *Discussion and Implications* scored high in Driscoll & Perdue's analysis. As Driscoll & Perdue (2012) note, some of their rubric criteria can be met through organizational style (p. 29)—which might explain why “organization” in terms of research presentation is dictated in the social sciences. A research model designed to meet the demands of RAD research must include a systematic discussion of practices necessary to produce this kind of research.

The approaches essential to practitioner inquiry and for which methods are articulated by Liggett, Jordan, & Price (2011) are *Reflexivity* and *Dialectic*. The authors see them as interrelated, defining them as informing the “systematic investigation” practitioner inquirers undertake “to test and validate the knowledge they create” (p. 57). The practitioner inquirer thus employs a method of recursively questioning and comparing assumptions and negations against what others have found (using both quantitative and qualitative data) to determine the validity of their own findings. In other words, researchers do not necessarily proceed in linear fashion, but rather revisit claims and findings as more data is gathered and analyzed. Early assumptions are then re-evaluated and often reformulated. The authors, in their discussion of pragmatic inquiry, a sub-category of practitioner inquiry in their taxonomy, go on to clarify that this practice could entail “engaging in discussion with others (such as tutors, student writers, administrators, teachers, and writing center directors), [as well as] borrowing methods used by Conceptual and Empirical researchers” (p. 62). Moreover, the practitioner inquirer often interacts with multiple and varied data sets which could include textual analysis, fieldwork in the form of interviews or conducting surveys, and professional listserves.

The main difference between practitioner inquiry and other forms of empirical research, according to Liggett, Jordan, & Price (2011), as this practice of recursivity suggests, is that the researcher does not work from a fixed research plan. While reformulating and rethinking the research, including essential elements such as research questions and hypothesis, might be a hallmark of practitioner inquiry, this does not mean that a detailed accounting of data and process should differ significantly from other forms of empirical research. The authors note that “a crucial component [of practitioner inquiry] is explication of the dialectic, showing how each encounter with ‘an other’ complicated, enriched, challenged, or confirmed the researcher’s thinking” (p. 62). Although this recordation of the thinking and interacting process is essential and meaningful, explicit description of data and how and why

it was chosen also needs to be included. Thus, a research model would both accommodate practices of recursivity and dialectic exchange, and, at the same time, facilitate description of data and methods used in data collection.

Out of Cochran-Smith & Lytle's eight "characteristics," the two that demand the most consideration in a research model are *Validity and Generalizability* and *Systematicity*. While the authors group validity and generalizability together, they discuss them separately, as I do. In discussing validity, Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) argue that different kinds of data—specifically various forms of qualitative data—should be considered valid data sets, a concept solidly aligned with understandings of data amongst writing center practitioners. Citing other scholars in the field, they note that when relying on qualitative data, "validity rests on concrete examples ... of actual practices presented in enough detail that the relevant community can judge trustworthiness and usefulness" and that criteria for evaluating data include "significance, quality, grounding, and authority" (p.43). Their first criterion is reminiscent of Clifford Geertz's (1977) concept of "thick description," which became a defining element of ethnography after the interpretive turn. Additionally, these methods are informed by notions of collaboration as is evidenced by Cochran-Smith & Lytle's articulation of several ideas of validity particularly relevant to practitioner inquiry:

democratic validity (honoring the perspectives of all stakeholders), outcome validity (resolving the problems addressed), process validity (using appropriate and adequate research methods and inquiry practices), catalytic validity (deepening the understandings of all participants), and dialogic validity (monitoring analysis through critical and reflective discussion with peers). (p. 44)

Noteworthy here is the way collaboration as a theoretical approach is embedded overtly in concepts such as democratic validity, catalytic validity, and dialogic validity, and implied in outcome validity and process validity. Dialogic validity corresponds to Liggett, Jordan, & Price's (2011) notion of reflexive/dialectic. Harkening to their suggested practices to realize reflexive/dialectic, there remains a need for articulation of methods that correspond with the implied collaborative approach to realize these concepts of validity.

Systematicity, of all the features noted by both groups of scholars, is dealt with in the most detail in terms of methods. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) describe methods for actuating systematicity to include "documenting classroom practice and students' learning, [and] sys-

tematically document from the inside perspective their own questions, interpretative frameworks, changes in views over time, dilemmas and recurring themes” (p. 44). This approach to systematicity overlaps significantly with the recursive practices Liggett, Jordan, & Price (2011) detail as part of a practitioner’s reflexive stance. In their discussion of systematicity, Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) note, “a strength of practitioner inquiry is that it entails multiple data sources that illuminate and confirm, but also disconfirm, one another” (p. 44). While the idea of multiple data sets is implied through the discussion of dialectic in Liggett, Jordan, & Price’s (2011) work, to strengthen validity, multiple data sources need to be emphasized in a research model. Incorporating the concept of triangulation (which I will more fully explain in the next section) in a research design can work to underscore the importance of examining a research variable from multiple perspectives.

The discussion of generalizability, however, for both groups of scholars is problematic. For Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009), the discussion is limited to advocating for new understandings of what generalizability means; they write, “an important feature shared by many forms of practitioner inquiry is that notions of validity and generalizability are quite different from the traditional criteria” (p. 43). While the differences in terms of validity are given a fuller treatment, the discussion on generalizability falls short. For Liggett, Jordan, & Price (2011), “Practitioner Inquirers overstep methodological boundaries if they attach global implications to their findings” (p. 63), and, thus, generalizability does not play a role in their model of practitioner inquiry. I see both of these treatments as limiting and propose that a model for practitioner inquiry that is designed to meet the demands of RAD research necessarily incorporates some notion of generalizability. Because of the importance of generalizability and validity to realizing RAD research, I suggest the two concepts be dealt with separately.

Cochran-Smith & Lytle and Liggett, Jordan, & Price contribute significantly to current understandings of practitioner inquiry, particularly in explicating essential methodological components and laying groundwork in terms of methods. However, if practitioner inquiry is to be presented as a viable research model for producing RAD research, both models need further development. Specifically, an operable model should identify specific approaches that address the primary concerns of the methodology (i.e., supporting socially constructed knowledge-making practices and collaboration), and then further articulate methods for each point in the research process.

A Model of Practitioner Inquiry for Writing Center Research

As the saying goes, “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” and indeed there are many aspects of practitioner inquiry as articulated by Cochran-Smith & Lytle and Liggett, Jordan, & Price that are foundational. However, there remain gaps and absences in understandings of what practitioner inquiry should involve. In this next section, I present a Practitioner Inquiry Research Model that encompasses elements from earlier models and builds upon the previous work through adaptations and additions.

Several of the features discussed by both Cochran-Smith & Lytle and Liggett, Jordan, & Price, such as *Practitioner as Researcher*, *Professional Context as Inquiry Site/Professional Practice as Focus of Study* and *Blurred Boundaries between Inquiry and Practice*, are identifying characteristics of practitioner inquiry and should be incorporated into any practitioner inquiry research model. In the model I present here, they will fall under the category of “Determining Factors”—factors to consider when deciding whether a practitioner inquiry research model is appropriate for a particular research context.

Theories of collaboration and understanding knowledge as socially constructed, which are identified by Cochran-Smith & Lytle, also need to be integrated. Although these features of practitioner inquiry are not specifically named by Liggett, Jordan, & Price, as I have noted earlier, they are implied in their work and foundational to writing center pedagogy. I would argue, for example, that the dialectic process Liggett, Jordan, & Price discuss, through which the researcher interrogates their own assumptions and conclusions by interacting with others either directly or through data, reflects a valuing of others’ knowledge by the very act of incorporating it into the knowledge-making process. I consider collaboration and social construction of knowledge and knowledge making as theories of practice informing methodology; however, there are methods that can be articulated to enhance the realization of them. In the model I present below, I will draw from the work of Gesa Kirsch & Joy Ritchie (1995) as well as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), whose work has had a significant impact in terms of how ethnography is practiced in composition studies.

For example, Kirsch & Ritchie (1999) argue that the researcher should “collaborat[e] with participants in the development of research questions, the interpretation of data at both the descriptive and interpretive levels, and the writing of research reports” (p. 8). Similarly, Smith (1999), who focuses on research in indigenous contexts, calls for the researcher to collaborate with the researched from the very inception of the design to ensure that research participants are not exploited.

Articulating the researcher's positionality in relationship to the research and research subject strengthens these endeavors by promoting transparency in terms of collaborative practices. Ruth Ray (1996) notes that narratives detailing the researcher's positionality can capture the "contingencies of fieldwork in everyday classrooms" (p. 287), and thus facilitate understandings of the impact of research on both the researcher and researched. These kinds of practices not only actualize collaboration, but foster ethical research that ensures that all stakeholders benefit and are, at the same time, protected in the research process.⁶ In the case of writing center research, this means that our research benefits writing consultants and writers, something I would argue most if not all writing center practitioners are already concerned with. If articulated in a research model, these practices would become part of our research "stance," just as it is embedded in our practice stance.

In terms of validity (which I propose be separated from generalizability), both groups of scholars include qualitative sources as data and mention making use of multiple data sources to investigate research questions. The use of qualitative forms of data needs little defense any longer, as even in the sciences, particularly in the area of Science Education, qualitative data plays an increasingly prominent role in research (Devetak, Glažar, & Vogrinc, 2010). Liggett, Jordan, & Price's (2011) notion of dialectic and reflexivity facilitates engaging with multiple data sources in that a practitioner inquirer is constantly looking to others to substantiate or challenge assumptions. Cochran-Smith & Lytle are more concrete, specifically noting that engagement with multiple data sets is a strength of practitioner inquiry. *Triangulation* is advocated for dealing with multiple data sets as a means of strengthening the validity of qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Berg, 2001). Validity is undoubtedly enhanced by triangulation, but in actuality, triangulation is more complex than incorporating multiple data sources. Pointing to an understanding of triangulation that expands beyond including multiple data sources, Bruce Berg (2001) notes that "triangulation actually represents varieties of data, investigators, theories, and methods" (p. 4), all elements embedded in the models discussed and further emphasized in my model, which incorporates triangulation as a methodological component.

Systematicity is also essential to a research model, and as discussed previously, both groups of scholars provide some detail as to how systematicity is achieved. Liggett, Jordan, & Price (2011) call for thick

6 Of course, securing Institutional Review Board approval to research human subjects when appropriate is also an essential part of this process.

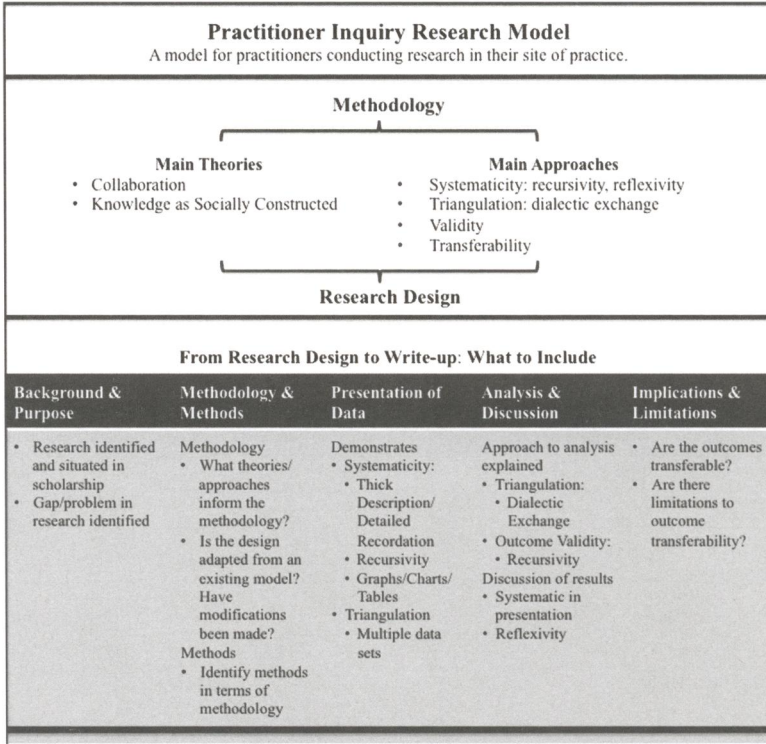
description of practices and processes, and Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) note the recordation of specific pieces of data: i.e., classroom activities, learning achieved, thinking processes, etc. The work of these scholars can be used as a springboard to further articulate how and when systematic recordation can enhance RAD research in writing centers: i.e., detailed recordation of the center site, tutor preparation, tutor-writer/tutor-tutor/tutor-director interactions, etc.

This brings me to generalizability. As noted earlier, Liggett, Jordan, & Price (2011) suggest that generalizability lies beyond the scope of practitioner inquiry, while Cochran-Smith & Lytle indicate that it can be achieved, but differently than in traditional understandings of research. Both groups of scholars indicate that the inherent aspects of practitioner inquiry problematize generalizability—if the research is localized, how can it be generalizable? Although I believe there are instances when practitioner inquiry can yield results that are generalizable, I posit that the concept of *transferability*, which has been adopted in the field of ethnography, better suits the purposes of a writing center research model. In their cross-decade overview of *Generalizability and Transferability*, Jeffrey Barnes, Kerri Conrad, Christof Demont-Heinrich, Mary Graziano, Dawn Kowalski, Jamie Neufeld, Jen Zamora, & Mike Palmquist (1994–2012), explain the two as follows: *Generalizability* “can be defined as the extension of research findings and conclusions from a study conducted on a sample population to the population at large”; whereas *Transferability* “does not involve broad claims, but invites readers of research to make connections between elements of a study and their own experience.” Scholars, including those discussed in this article, have noted the limitations of practitioner inquiry to produce generalizable results; however, as these same and many other scholars argue, the results we produce are valuable and potentially applicable in other contexts. Transferability provides a frame for validating and making use of our research in a way that more readily lends itself to RAD research. Barnes, Demont-Heinrich, Graziano, Kowalski, Neufeld, Zamora, & Palmquist (1994–2012) explain that transferability facilitates the receivers’ agency over determining the applicability of research, noting, “Transferability is a process performed by *readers* of research.” For example, to determine transferability, readers note features in the research that are recognizable and comparable to their own. Through thick description, the researcher must supply enough detail for readers to decide whether sufficient similarities exist to determine if the outcomes would likely be consistent if that research were undertaken in their own research context. The authors go on to note that while transferability can be applied to any kind of research, it is most “relevant” when applied to research involving

qualitative data, including ethnographies, case studies, and surveys—all notably common in writing center research.

Below is an articulation of a practitioner inquiry research model incorporating the elements from the various scholarship I have cited throughout this work. These theories and approaches, such as collaboration, systematicity, triangulation, validity, and transferability, collectively inform both methodology and, correspondingly, the methods necessary for a research model, especially one designed to produce RAD research. This model is a hybrid, as it incorporates efficacious practices from other pre-existing models and also builds upon those models. In the case of generalizability, I suggest an alternate practice of transferability to bolster our ability to address elements of RAD, such as limitations and implications for future work.

Practitioner Inquiry: A RAD Research Model



Determining Factors:

1. *Practitioner as Researcher*: A practitioner in a particular context simultaneously assumes the role of researcher.
2. *Professional Context as Inquiry Site/Professional Practice as Focus of Study*: Research is located in/based on the particular context in which a practitioner works. The researcher seeks to answer a question, solve a problem, and/or improve/identify practices specifically related to the context of their work as a practitioner.

Theories informing Practitioner Inquiry Methodology:

Collaboration & Social Construction of Knowledge: Incorporates concepts of knowledge and collaboration inherent to both writing center pedagogy and conducting ethical research. It supports understanding “knowledge and reality as mediated by or constructed through language in

social use, as socially constructed, contextualized, as ... the product of collaboration” (Lunsford, 1991, p. 71; and seeing research as a form of community action, wherein researchers assume “people know and can reflect on their own lives, have questions and priorities of their own, have skills and sensitivities which can enhance (or undermine) any community-based projects” (Smith, 1999, p. 127).

Approaches informing Practitioner Inquiry Methodology:

1. Systematicity: presenting information through thick description and so that processes are replicable; adopting recursivity as part of systematic processes.
2. Triangulation: identifying multiple data and explaining how they are operationalized; engaging in dialectic with different sources.
3. Validity: identifying the kind of validity and explaining how validity is determined through triangulation.
4. Transferability: identifying how and when might the research be applicable to another site; identifying the limitations of transferability.

Research Design and Write-up Checklist:

1. Background and purpose:
 - Is the subject of research clearly identified and situated within scholarship?
 - Is the gap in the research or problem identified?
2. Methodology & methods:
 - Is the research methodology clearly explained and grounded in scholarship (theories and approaches: do they align with an existing design)?
 - Have modifications been made to an existing design? If so, how and why?
 - Are methods (practices) and the way they align with the methodology clearly articulated?
 - Are the choices of research subject, processes of data collection, evaluative measures explained?
 - Are multiple data sources and the way they are operationalized (particularly for qualitative data sets) described with enough detail to demonstrate *systematicity* and *validity*?

3. Presentation of Data:

- Does the presentation of data, demonstrate a) *systematicity* through graphs, charts, and tables when relevant; and b) *triangulation* through identification of multiple data sets?

4. Analysis and Discussion:

- Does the approach to analysis represent *systematicity* and *triangulation* practices sufficiently to strengthen *validity*?
- Are *recursivity* and *dialectic exchange* employed as tools for analysis?
- Does the discussion of results include enough detail?

5. Implications and Limitations:

- In what ways is the research *transferrable*?
- Are there considerations/limitations to be taken into account when transferring results?

Conclusion

Practitioner inquiry is commonly employed in writing center research because it facilitates investigations we find useful and practical: research on how to improve the work we do in the location we do it. It seems only logical that if we are to address a call to articulate methodologies for producing RAD research, we must first examine the applicability of practices we already use. By building upon the foundational work identifying hallmarks of practitioner inquiry and its limitations, I have presented a model incorporating concepts of triangulation and transferability, which I suggest can promote the potential of practitioner inquiry to produce RAD research. Investigating the efficacy of our practices will be increasingly important if writing centers are to change and adapt to new formulations of academia without losing their identifying characteristics as places that disrupt the hierarchies in our institutions. Incorporating elements such as triangulation and transferability into existing iterations of practitioner inquiry can facilitate meeting the demands of research—like calls for RAD—while still enacting a hands-on approach that allows us to never lose sight of the theoretical underpinnings—collaboration, the social construction of knowledge, and the corresponding interrogation of hierarchical knowledge structures—that inform our work.

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