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Pam Bromley

Kara J. Northway

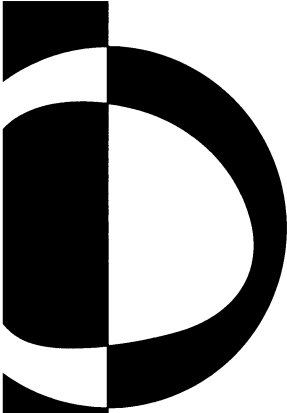
Eliana Schonberg

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**Pam Bromley
Kara J. Northway
Eliana Schonberg**

Review: *Strategies for Writing Center Research*, by Jackie Grutsch McKinney

What a pleasure for the three of us to review Jackie Grutsch McKinney's (2016) broadly appealing *Strategies for Writing Center Research*, which aims "to lay out the process of research in a straightforward way" (p. 33). Two of us, trained in the humanities, wish we had had this book's guidance when we were reorienting our research agendas to incorporate the data saturating our first writing centers. Now, seven years into our collaboration, we have continued to navigate disagreements and make difficult decisions regarding research design. Simultaneously, as teachers and mentors, we have struggled with the lack of an accessible, user-friendly research handbook for our undergraduate and graduate students. This timely book, therefore, supports a major disciplinary issue of deep interest to us and other readers: namely, the campaign for RAD (replicable, aggregable, and data-driven) research. Equally significant for the field is the text's engagement with collaboration, an engagement that unfolds quietly as one reads.

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Because of its warm and empowering tone, its expansive view of the possibilities of writing center research, and not least, its affordability, *Strategies for Writing Center Research* is an effective initiation into some empirical methods; it is also a book that can help our field confront pressing issues. The book's stated goal is for readers to embrace and redefine "empirical research, meaning *planned inquiry with systematic data collection, analysis, and reporting*" (p. xvii). Grutsch McKinney identifies her efforts as contributing to the growth in research begun by Stephen North, Richard Haswell, Elizabeth Boquet, and Neal Lerner. Aligning herself with RAD advocates Dana Lynn Driscoll & Sherry Wynn Perdue; Sarah Liggett, Kerri Jordan, & Steve Price; and Rebecca Day Babcock & Terese Thonus, Grutsch McKinney argues that the field needs more empirical research. We heartily agree. In particular, she advocates for studies that look outside the tutor-student conversation in the manner of The Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (Kail, Gillespie, & Hughes, 2016) and, we would add, are in line with her research on administration: the prize-winning *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers* (2013) and *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors*, with Nicole I. Caswell & Rebecca Jackson (2016).

Strategies adds to the field's call for better research on the extension of methodological tools to a larger audience, rightly emphasizing the multidisciplinary nature of writing center practitioners. While scholars such as Ann Blakeslee & Cathy Fleischer (2010) in *Becoming a Writing Researcher* and Lauren Fitzgerald & Melissa Ianetta (2016) in *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors* focused partly on developing rigorous research skills in students, Grutsch McKinney casts her net much further, seeking to make the research process "more concrete" for dissertation-level students, administrators, composition and rhetoric researchers, and new and experienced practitioners wishing for an overview of applicable methodologies (p. xxi). Grutsch McKinney thereby both addresses and extends the audience of the Parlor Press series *Lenses on Composition Studies*, geared towards experienced undergraduates and early graduate students. In her words, she targets those readers who are "desperate to become a member of the field but not sure how to do that" (p. xvi). This handbook's purpose is to summarize and disseminate an empirical research toolkit and real-world advice to a far-reaching audience, ideally advanced undergraduates and beginning graduate students, and the book, therefore, makes an effective addition to a tutor-training class.

The book's organization suits the needs of its target audiences: the three main parts can be read consecutively but lend themselves well to iterative reference. After the Introduction justifies the purpose of conducting research, Part I guides readers through starting and plan-

ning an empirical research project. This first section also provides an instructive and concise history of the process movement, post-process composition, and constructivist pedagogy. Part II outlines five approaches for empirical studies: discourse analysis, interviews and focus groups, surveys, ethnographic fieldwork, and action research. Part III is devoted to data analyses, providing valuable information on research deliverables for audiences as diverse as classmates, fellow tutors, online readers, dissertation committees, journal subscribers, future employers, and college administrators. Well-chosen examples of current published research punctuate these three parts. Moreover, in the style of Harry C. Denny's (2010) *Facing the Center*, short, interwoven reflections have been written by three additional scholars, an undergraduate researcher, and Grutsch McKinney with her two collaborators. Specifically, the Research Notebook sections, which chronicle a long, collaborative project, offset the linearity of the research process described in Parts I–III: “the research path is twistier than planned” (p. 33). The After the Study sections provide beneficial insight into how real researchers learn from mistakes and successes. Finally, the book includes some student-friendly features: bold-font keywords, appendices, a glossary, lots of white space, and recommended readings. *Strategies for Writing Center Research* thus “pull[s] back the curtain” on social science methodologies and situates readers’ nascent writing center work within the developmental arc of composition and rhetoric, all the while proposing directions for future studies (p. xiii). With this book in hand, early researchers can join the field midstream.

The most important features are the book’s reassuring tone and practical advice on conducting research. The following examples highlight Grutsch McKinney’s skill in creating transparency from A to Z of the process: continually revising one’s question; waiting for human research permissions; collecting data that may not be used; acquiring good recordings because “Transcribing is tedious enough” (p. 47); encountering unexpected results; and understanding the financial limitations that researchers face. What distinguishes Grutsch McKinney is that she reveals her own growth as a researcher and convinces other notable scholars to share theirs; Karen Rowan notes: “I continue to work at improving the design of my surveys.” (p. 89). The book not only reflects solid practice but also recognizes how inexperience with the field’s methods of knowledge-creation can result in apprehension about professional identity or belonging. For instance, Research Notebook #2 counsels readers to organize and analyze data from the start “for your own sanity and for the quality of your research project” (p. 124). She recommends finding mentors, and this book itself serves as one, giving

readers the benefit of experienced researchers sitting alongside, sharing tips, and offering encouragement. While acknowledging the trials of the research process, she still doggedly asserts the “Enjoy[ment]” of writing center work (p. xx).

Any text trying to meet the needs of several constituencies at once inevitably will leave knowledge gaps for some and over-explain areas for others (e.g., survey question design, pp. 82–86; coding texts, pp. 45–49 and pp. 184–187). As a result, readers will occasionally need patience, remembering that the book is not speaking only to them. For us as readers, the most notable omission was the text’s treatment of collaboration. Despite equipping the reader for typical research projects, this handbook is silent on issues frequently raised during collaborations. The Research Notebooks, for example, elide a research group’s decision-making processes, such as methodological preferences or the addition of collaborators. The book therefore overlooks key moments to highlight Andrea Lunsford’s (1991) idea that “dissensus” is a valuable knowledge-making strategy (p. 97).

Ultimately, this minor issue in a worthwhile new book exposes significant discipline-wide tensions. These tensions consist of both a push for research and a need for training in a scholarly community constantly welcoming fresh practitioners and tutors, including some reluctant to do research; two of us have witnessed the effects of high turnover on research interest. Grutsch McKinney celebrates the field’s openness and ability to lure one “to writing center work because, like me, it was an entry point into the field that welcomed them as full participants even though they were absolute beginners” (p. xvi). Familiarizing all readers with essential research methods—especially “quickly!” as Grutsch McKinney hopes—is an idealistic, if difficult, undertaking (p. xvi). After all, getting writing centers researching has been a challenge confronting the field since at least the 1980s (Mullin, 1990).

Strategies identifies one further tension: the discipline’s relationship with composition and rhetoric. Grutsch McKinney hopes that composition and rhetoric scholars may “see the rich potential for the writing center as a research site” (p. xvii). Including those outside writing centers in her intended audience could explain some sentences that may strike experienced readers as defensive: “The possibility of the writing center for serious, interesting, groundbreaking writing research cannot be overstated” (p. xxii). Her aspiration for composition and rhetoric to accept writing center studies by means of the common language of data illustrates the writing center field’s ongoing insecurity. We three are

left wondering whether bringing the disciplines closer together is the desirable direction for scholars today.

This disciplinary anxiety could explain writing center scholars' possibly too-quick embrace of RAD research as a concept. Coined by Haswell (2005), the term "RAD research" gained currency as a direct result of Driscoll & Wynn Perdue's (2012) award-winning *Writing Center Journal* article. Interestingly, the term has been adopted almost exclusively by writing center scholars (e.g., Lerner, 2014; Nordlof, 2014; Hewett, 2015; Nordstrom, 2015; Block, 2016; Hopkins, 2016; Salem 2016; Wells, 2016). The field needs to question whether this language constrains current thinking, lest research foci in the field become overly narrow. Grutsch McKinney clearly presents RAD research "to complement the existing [scholarly] work," including theoretical and practitioner-based approaches (p. xviii; pp. 8–10), and her book offers a valuable reminder of this range. As researchers who already actively employ RAD methodologies, we found the particular focus of her self-described "research evangelism" compelling (p. xiii). For fledgling scholars, however, the extensive examination of five RAD methodologies may limit the potential of other empirical research methods, such as analyses of corpora collected for different purposes or archival work.

For anyone embarking on the next wave of writing center scholarship, *Strategies for Writing Center Research* throws into relief the field's foundational concerns, the need to use and disseminate empirical methods being only among the most prominent. This book also stimulates long-overdue reflection on the positioning of our field in relation to composition and rhetoric, to the ever-increasing stream of newcomers to the field, and to the language used to talk about collaboration or about what counts as knowledge. Grutsch McKinney equips an admirably wide range of prospective researchers to start solving these challenges—because to do so, the field will indeed require *everyone's* participation.

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About the Authors

Pam Bromley directs the Writing Center at Pomona College and is assistant professor in the Politics department. A past president of the Southern California Writing Centers Association, she is currently working on documenting writing centers outside the United States.

Kara Northway is Associate Professor of English at Kansas State University. She is a former recipient of an IWCA Research Grant; and several articles coauthored with Pam Bromley and Eliana Schonberg have appeared in *The Writing Center Journal*, *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, *Across the Disciplines*, and *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*. Her research focus also extends to the historical practices of writers during the early modern period.

Eliana Schonberg is director of the TWP Writing Studio at Duke University where she is also an Assistant Professor of the Practice in the Thompson Writing Program. Her current research interests include knowledge transfer, student self-efficacy, and cross-institutional comparisons of writing center data sets.