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Points of Departure: Rethinking Student Source Use and Writing Studies Research Methods

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BOOK REVIEW

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Summary/analysis

> *[T]he (re)turn to quantitative research in recent years has brought with it the renewed hope that such research will be shared – and shared widely in a way that helps us answer more global questions about writer, writing, and our work between and beyond local, singular sites.* -Serviss & Jamieson, 2018, p. 25

Serviss and Jamieson, editors of a recent collection titled – *Points of Departure* – call for a return to empirical approaches in writing research. In starting the book with a brief overview of recent calls for RAD research (research that is replicable, aggregable, and data-supported), the editors suggest data-driven research at multiple locations can allow researchers to understand both local sites of inquiry and help make sense of larger multi-site phenomenon. In order to understand a greater phenomenon in writing, the field needs multiple studies that replicate key aspects from prior studies and use established methodologies while adapting and modifying aspects of those prior studies according to the needs and conditions of the local sites.

This book raises a series of important questions: How do we study writing? How do we build studies that are informed and inspired by previous methodological designs while accounting for the local ways writing occurs? How do we study local contexts in ways which allow us to extradite methods and research designs in order to answers questions about multiple locals at once? In other words, are there ways to accommodate and shape our research designs for local contexts, yet pull out elements of designs which can be replicated in other contexts (without losing the flexibility the local often requires)?

Throughout the eight chapters, each focusing on student source use as data, *Points of Departure* looks at the various ways researchers can study the processes students use when researching and writing. By highlighting on student source use, the collection argues that developing research methods (even methods rooted in RAD frameworks) is a process, and that process can be a site of constant refinement and adaptation. In other words, study design can be a source of inquiry and further study as well. Therefore, each chapter explains and reflects on the methods used in different studies and discusses the potential methodological implications for sites looking to replicate and adapt the work inside the book. To Serviss and Jamieson, viewing methods as objects of study themselves goes against the conventional RAD paradigm given reflecting and refining methods can mean researchers reshape established methods. However, according to the editors, RAD-inspired research in writing studies "ought to be continuously evolving rather than simply being reproduced and verified via replication" (p. 28). Meaning, a researcher can use a RAD-inspired study with established methods but adapt those methods according to the needs to the local site where the research is being conducted. In other words, adaptation is vital for acknowledging the diverse needs of different local situations, contexts, and institutions. The book primarily argues that when local sites adapt RAD-inspired studies, large data sets can still be complied to show large-scale phenomenon.

Throughout the text, *Points of Departure* offers writing studies various ways of accounting for research-in-process, while suggesting ways these local contexts can add, shape, and pull into data-driven research – specifically research with a RAD orientation. Right before chapter one, the editors unpack the concept of "transcontextual RAD research", which suggests researchers be reflexive (reflect back on the data). Using Brandt's and Clinton's work (2002), they extend the ideas that, just like "literacy as social practices happening translocally across and within several contexts simultaneously," a transcontextual orientation toward research sees locally situated writing research

as helpful to the original locale and helpful to the greater body of researchers. Transcontextual research "dissolves isolationist tendencies across research contexts, fostering the expansion and strengthening of our cumulative understandings of writing while also remaining mindful of contextually specific differences" (p. 27). The research in these chapters is not only important for the original locations of each study; these chapters create jumping off points for future researchers who want to combine the reliability of replication with the adaptation to specific communities.

Important to note, the authors themselves review arguments against RAD research. One of the primary arguments they highlight suggests that when studies are replicated, reliability decreases as results from replication only yield similar results in less than two-thirds of studies (p. 83). Furthermore, a primary criticism against quantifying writing is that it does not leave room for the complex relationship between semiotic activity, cognition, or the multiple ways writers make sense of the world. However, this collection suggests that even though replication is difficult and challenging, we can learn from the times replication fails. Issues with replication provides researchers with opportunities for method refinement and potentially sheds light onto areas of needed improvement in our methods. Furthermore, according to the editors, when replication fails in a study, it proves the very thing RAD research can show: the complexity and heterogenous ways phenomenon occur. In other words, when replication fails, researchers get a peek into how complex and multifaceted writing and the process of writing really is. What some call the weakness of large-scale RAD research – failure in replication or aggregability – is really a way for writing studies research to show the ways different phenomena can be occurring and will be occurring in the future. Failure in replication provides us with opportunities to improve and expand how we operationalize writing and writing processes; it shows us the ways our coding and methods can be improved to reflect a more accurate way of accounting for the messiness of writing.

With criticisms of RAD research in mind, we must also consider the editor's call for a transcontextual approach. For transcontextual research to work, one must adopt two principles established early in the book: (1) "research is never finished" (p. 29) and (2) research emerging from failure is valuable. This is a primary take-away from the book for those interested in RAD research and multi-site studies. The editors admit the following:

> Our understanding of translocal and transcontextual methods dovetails with traditional notions of RAD research, which has, at its heart, the ideas that data can be collected from more than one site using the same method and that as a result of replicating the method, researchers can compare aggregated findings across contexts. (p. 29)

As the title implies, sharing methods and results of studies (even failed studies) provides future research "points of departure". These points of departure are places where researchers can extract key methods and adapt others. To take up a transcontextual approach means understanding "the challenge is to determine which conditions should be replicated and what impact that will have on the findings" (p. 84–85). In other words, failed replication and imperfect pilot studies can teach us something:

> Understanding emergent local research and pilot studies in this way, as part of a process that makes space for deeper and broader understanding, means that sharing possibly imperfect initial studies ought not require bravery but should be celebrated as part of a process that is itself the sustenance of writing research. (p. 31)

Another important take-away in the book: a mixed-methods approach is key. Statistical data is not separate from the qualitative work we do in writing studies. Meaning, we can look at the object of our studies in various ways of course. As the editors suggest, a mixed-method transcontextual approach allows us to do quantitative work on statistical data, but to also use that statistical data as a starting point for qualitative work. Rather than doing research based on "something I observed in my class this semester" (p. 53), we can look for "frequencies and correlations we see in the data" for follow-up research using qualitative approaches (deep textual analysis for example) or further quantitative re-assessments. In short, "using big data to shape close reading" (p. 53) of student texts showing the various

ways writers arrive at what the quantitative data is telling researchers. This means we can account for the heterogeneous ways writers arrive at the specific phenomena that the quantitative research shows.

In connection, the editors argue, "we need to look beyond the *typified* writing practices frequently reported in school settings in favor of studying the actual ways successful writing works" (p. 91). By bringing in prior work in writing studies (Prior, 1998; Roozen, 2010; Sheridan & Rowsell, 2010; Shipka, 2011, etc.) which suggests writing emerges from complex interplays between events, places, artifacts, and timelines, the authors support this research by ultimately asking a similar question: "How do we attend to the practices and strategies of individual writers while also learning more about how writing develops with translocal and trascontexual applications in mind?" (p. 92). One way to resolve this question, according to the authors, is seeing research as "productive, generative connections between the local and translocal, the contextual and transcontextual" (p. 92). Part of understanding what happens outside the classroom and its connection to writing is figuring out ways our methods and research design can account for such spaces – the places students create, make, and write outside our classrooms and courses. Even our classrooms, as the editors suggest (p. 93) are hard to trace and can look messy in comparison to structured laboratory environments where elements are strictly controlled. Chapters three through five specifically work through various ways design-based research – research methods attempting to account for realistic learning spaces – can help RAD research capture the unpredictable and various spaces learning and writing happen (p. 96).

Through these chapters, this text offers writing studies several suggestions for methodological design: a call for empirical studies, suggestions for replicating studies with local context sensitivity, examples of participant collaboration in study design and methods, and an orientation to transcontextual research methods. After reading this text, I'm a bit closer to understanding how research "can be transformative" (p. 245) in ways that include participants, statistical data, and local needs. In viewing data-driven research as transcontextual, "findings become integrated into our way of thinking and doing, they change it irreversibly" (p. 245). And that's one of the primary points of this text: local research can connect the dots to other local research shaping and informing our ideas of larger phenomena. Researching writing is less about creating a perfectly designed study which can be transferred across multiple sites and partly about learning what we don't know through our failed replication. Research writing is built from a collective of local contexts weaved together through and by statistics. Researching writing requires us to take what we methodologically know and move closer to what we don't know: to trace writing in the local spaces we haven't filled in yet.

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