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# THE CONSTRUCTION OF RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND METHODS

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People study what is accessible to study, what is available to them techno-logically. But why haven't researchers and scholars said so, and more impor-tant, why have they not raised questions about what was not studied?
   —Sullivan and Porter (1997, p. 9)

We do not find problems, we create them.
   —Young (1981, p. 60)

It has been generally recognized that research questions are crucial to the shape research takes as a whole. Blakeslee and Fleischer (2007) acknowledge this when they write, "Although it sounds like a simple thing to do, articulating a good research question can be a challenge. Some scholars contend that research stud-ies are only as good as the research questions behind them, which can put a great deal of pressure on you as a new researcher" (p. 13). As a field, writing studies has recognized that forming good research questions is a crucial part of the research process. Beyond that acknowledgment, however, there is little under-standing of how researchers move from research problems to research questions, leaving the relationship between epistemology and research question largely invisible. Nancy Naples (2003) suggests that leaving the relationship between epistemological positions, experience, and research invisible leads inevitably to the reinscription of unexamined biases: "if researchers fail to explore how their personal, professional, and structural positions frame social scientific investiga-tions, researchers inevitably reproduce dominant gender, race, and class biases" (p. 3). These unexamined biases include not only the dominant gender, race, and class biases but a host of others related to social position (sexual orientation, edu-

cational attainment, able-bodiness, religious belief, etc.), as well as assumptions about the scholarly field to which our research contributes (what counts as knowledge, what counts as research, what is accessible to study, what is not, what methods are expected). These epistemological assumptions "also influence how we define our roles as researchers, what we consider ethical research practices, and how we interpret and implement informed consent or ensure the confidentiality of our research subjects" (Naples, 2003, p. 3). If researchers are to be in control of their research practice, it's crucial to explore (and understand) the roles our epistemological, political, and ideological assumptions and commitments, as well as our experiences and knowledge, play in the shaping of our problems and questions. Our epistemological positions influence what we even perceive to be a researchable problem, and further influence how we move from researchable problem to research question. It's important in this context to be precise about the distinction between "problem" and "question": We argue in this chapter that researchers "create" problems, and then develop research questions based on those perceived, rather than preexisting, problems.

Krista Ratcliffe (2005) argues that there is a formative connection between a researcher's assumptions about the objects of study, his or her expectations for research, and his or her understanding of her data:

> assumptions about identification … inform researchers' assumptions about the identities of people, histories, cultures, or artifacts being studied. Indeed our (un)conscious assumptions about identification inform not just who we are but what we expect from ourselves, from others, and from language. And all of these assumptions affect the data and conclusions of a scholarly study. (p. 51)

Ratcliffe suggests that epistemological assumptions permeate the work we do as researchers, oftentimes unconsciously. If Ratcliffe is correct in the way epistemological assumptions permeate research work, then it is crucial to understand just exactly what role such assumptions play in our decision making as researchers. Patricia Sullivan and James Porter (1997) point out, "People study what is accessible to study, what is available to them technologically," and they call for more explicit reflection: "But why haven't researchers and scholars said so, and more important, why have they not raised questions about what was not studied?" (p. 9). Sullivan and Porter call on us as researchers to be explicit (in both our research practice and in the written texts that result from them) about the kinds of questions we feel are appropriate to ask, and (as importantly) what we don't ask. Richard Young (1981) says "We do not find problems, we create them" (p. 60). Problems, as well as questions, are not floating around the world somewhere waiting to be discovered; the very questions we ask are constructions by researchers. People study what is accessible to study; they also study what they have constructed as a problem worthy of attention.

In this chapter, we explore how researchers and scholars come to see problems as worthy of attention and how some writing studies scholars formulate research questions from these research problems. We take a cue from Hull, Rose, Fraser, and Catellano (1991) who point out that "knowing our intentions, we can forget to examine our assumptions" (p. 300). An (ongoing, continual) examination of our assumptions as researchers, as scholars, and as people enacting relationships through our research practices is important for understanding the potentials and limits of our research. Little attention has been paid to the epistemological and ideological processes that give shape to the research question, processes that give shape to the research project as a whole. In order to think about these processes, we begin with a theoretical discussion of felt difficulty and reflective practice and then turn to survey responses of recently published writing scholars who describe the formation of their research inquiry. We conclude with some guidelines and a heuristic for maintaining a reflective position toward the crucial formative stage in any research project.

## THE FORMATION OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research methodology texts tend to construct the research process as a consistently recognizable process: articulating a research question, planning research methods, collecting data, analyzing data, and writing up findings. Although the implicit linearity of the movement from stage to stage is perhaps an unintended consequence of analysis, research theorists do tend to begin the process with research question formation. Ann Blakeslee and Cathy Fleischer (2007), for example, structure *Becoming a Writing Researcher* (one of a small handful of methodology guide books authored specifically by and for writing and literacy researchers) around this stage model of research. Their text summarizes the generally consistent "tools for discovering, articulating, and narrowing questions" appearing in methodological texts, including taking personal and professional inventories, reading, observing, talking with others, writing, and gathering preliminary data. Frequently, researchers suggest that research questions begin with a "gap" in existing knowledge; of this gap, Blakeslee and Fleischer write,

> Sometimes … you sense a gap in what you are reading, something that is not addressed that you think should be. It may be a gap in the author's argument, or it may be a contradiction between what the author has claimed and what you have observed or experienced personally. Some scholars refer to this perception of a gap in the literature as a *felt difficulty*. You sense that something isn't quite right. … The gap, or felt difficulty, you perceive in your reading may well become the seed for the research question you formulate. (p. 19)[1]

Implicit in this gap (but crucial to any recognition of missing perspectives) is one's personal history of experiences, knowledge, and commitments, as Blakeslee and Fleischer suggest when they write, "In many cases, the topics you end up researching professionally will hold special meaning for you personally as well—they may be tied to your background or personal experience" (p. 15) and "the areas you research and the questions you pose for research are often connected to your personal and professional interests and experiences. They have a history"(p. 16).[2] When one's personal beliefs, epistemologies, experiences, and knowledge (all of which are grounded in gender, race, sexual orientation, age, class, religious affiliation, political commitment, and other subject positions) come in contact with existing scholarship, moments of dissonance might productively arise and begin to suggest potential research questions.

This lens of cognitive dissonance, in fact, has been one of the dominant ways research theorists have viewed research inquiry. MacNealy (1999), for example, identifies four categories of cognitive dissonance as the source of research problems—"a clash between beliefs, an expectation violated, a gap in knowledge, or a previously unnoticed connection between two phenomena" (p. 12)—and MacClean and Mohr (1999) similarly point to instances of cognitive dissonance as a source of research problems. Hayeset al. (1992) posit that the research problem "begins where all inquiry begins … in a moment of puzzlement, or curiosity, or need to know; more generally it begins, not in some impulse peculiar to the scientist, but, as Aristotle observed when discussing the philosophic impulse, in wonder" (p. 9). In an earlier piece, Young (1981) suggests that research begins with "a felt difficulty" by which he means to capture "the wrinkled brow and uneasy feeling characteristic of the earliest stage of inquiry" that arises from inconsistencies among elements of one's cognitive system.[3] He explains more fully that:

> Problems do not exist independent of men. There are no problems floating around in the world out there waiting to be discovered; there are only problems for someone. For problems arise from inconsistencies among elements of the individual's cognitive system. We do not find problems, we create them. One's cognitive system, his Image of the world (Boulding, 1956), is composed of values, beliefs, opinions, organized and unorganized information, all of which combine to form an exceedingly complex, more or less coherent system. A problem begins to take shape when one element of the Image is perceived to be inconsistent with another. (pp. 60-61)

The concept of *felt difficulty* offers a more complex alternative to the recognition or discovery models of research questions, and perhaps more significantly, the concept of felt difficulty places the focus not on existing bodies of scholarship but on the researcher—and his or her intellectual, emotional, and subjective perspective. Rather than seeing research questions "floating around in the world" or

existing in a "gap" in the literature, we see the researcher as the interpretive point through which the research question is constructed as the researcher confronts inconsistencies in his or her "values, beliefs, opinions, organized and unorganized information." When we think of research questions as existing out there waiting to be identified, we separate the researcher from the research problem (the researcher's role being merely to identify research questions that exist "out there") and we downplay or ignore the role the researcher's subjectivity (his or her experiences, knowledge, epistemological beliefs;political and ideological commitments; and subject positions) play in the construction of research questions. But like Young, we believe that problems do not exist independently of human beings—he asserts, "We do not find problems, we create them."

It is important to understand how these easily invisible processes of knowledge making and knowledge shaping can influence our research practice, and thus the types of conclusions we reach, in our research. Reflecting explicitly and articulating the choices we make as researchers is one way of being more in control of those influences:

> When we set the problem, we select what we will treat as the "things" of the
> situation, we set the boundaries of our attention to it, and we impose upon
> it a coherence which allows us to say what is wrong and in what directions
> the situation needs to be changed. Problem setting is a process in which,
> interactively, we name the things to which we will attend and frame the con-
> text in which we will attend to them. (Schön, 1982, p. 40)

Explicit reflection on our process of selecting the "things" of the situation, setting boundaries of our attention, and imposing coherence introduces a measure of accountability into the nascent beginning of our research process. As we set the terms of the research, the boundaries of our work, and the coherence of a research question that will guide the entire process, explicitly acknowledging how we arrive at the point of researching is crucial because when we do not interrogate these practices of what Schön calls problem setting and what Young would refer to as problem creation, we run the risk of implicitly reinscribing our own unexamined biases into the research design. Gesa Kirsch (1999) cautions that "We cannot help but be influenced by our own experiences, training, and ideological allegiances" (p. 18). Yes, research questions arise from and are grounded in a researcher's commitments; what's important is that we develop a richer understanding of how this is so and a more consistent recognition of the ways these too often invisible commitments have shaped the very study, in order to develop rigorous practices of accountability.[4]

In some ways, our research tells a story about us (the researchers) as much as it tells a story about the participants or site we studied. Mortensen and Kirsch (1996) point out that "Many scholars now assume that interpretation is central to all research, that researchers' values permeate and shape research questions,

observations, and conclusions" (p. xxi), and Laurel Richardson (1997) reflects, "What I choose to write about, how I choose to write it, and for whom I write it say more about me than sociodemographics, personality inventories, or horoscopes" (p. 19). In our case, this chapter began in a graduate seminar in which Pam was the instructor and Beth was a student. When discussion turned to an upcoming professional conference. Beth described the work she was presenting there—results from a study she and Jen had collected on how publishing scholars described their research question formation. In that study, they were seeking insight into how to frame researchable questions, how to determine appropriate methods, and how to articulate the relationship between the question and the methodological choices. Their interest began then with a felt difficulty: a desire to better understand how their own research processes might be modeled on the processes of successful scholars. This edited collection was in its initial stages, and Pam was planning a chapter about the need to understand research questions as a subjective process of creating problems rather than finding them. Pam had been interested in the complexity of research question creation and problem setting as a result of years of working with undergraduate and graduate students as they undertook research projects—from class projects to dissertations. Her interest in this issue began then with a different felt difficulty—a growing awareness that students needed more guidance in the problem and question stages of their research projects. All three of us worked in the same rhetoric and composition PhD program, yet only through impromptu conversation did we realize that we were independently working on virtually the same research question. The culture in which we worked—the program focus, the faculty and students in the program, the scholarly texts circulating through the program in official and extracurricular ways—all played an important role in positioning us to see the research project inherent in how researchers and scholars come to see problems as worthy of attention and how some writing studies scholars formulate research questions from these research problems.[5] In the following section, we turn to reflections we collected from recently published scholars about their research processes, particularly the formation of those processes, in order to examine how research problems, questions, and methods are constructed in actual practice. Meta-cognitive reflections such as these are rarely included in the final representations of research, although these reflections provide valuable insight into how some researchers and scholars work (and think about their work), which we believe is important not only in the way it provides models for other practicing researchers but also for the lessons we might learn about how knowledge is made in writing studies.

## RESEARCH QUESTION FORMATION-IN-ACTION

Invention heuristics (Young, Becker, & Pike, 1970) and means of assessing argumentation's initiation (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958; Toulmin, 2003) easily can be adapted to beginning research inquiries, and as we suggested earlier in this chapter, some writing studies theorists offer specific guidance in research practice. Yet few works examine what scholars actually do when they begin their research processes. What is involved in the creation of research questions? How do researchers make choices about methods? With these questions in mind, via email, we contacted 32 scholars who had published articles[6] in the previous two issues of *College Composition and Communication*, *College English*, *Written Communication*,[7] *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, and *Research in the Teaching of English*. We narrowed our field of participants to those who had recently published in one of the major journals in composition studies in order to capture a "state-of-the-field" type of snapshot as well as to attempt to lessen the time lapse between the researchers' question formation and their reflections on that process.[8] Eleven scholars agreed to participate in an open-ended email survey (see Appendix B for interview questions). They generously permitted us to use their names, allowing those familiar with their work to recognize the cross-section of the discipline represented here (see Appendix A for participants). Although participants are diverse in terms of institutional location and professional rank, our participants are not necessarily representative of the diversity of scholars working in our profession. Further investigations might focus on how nondominant subject positions (vis-à-vis gender, race, class, sexual orientation, disability, among others.) influence the kinds of problems researchers set or create.

The scholarship these participants discuss vary in their methods from empirical to theoretical to reflective narrative. Our participants engaged in empirical investigations (and thus followed a similar process to the one we described in the preceding section) but also were engaged in theoretical work that did not include data-based research. Across these varying types of scholarship, the survey responses suggest the range of ways research questions (of any kind) are grounded in our personal assumptions, belief systems, and ways of being in the world. If the personal, professional, and structural position us as researchers in the creation of research problems, then it's crucial to understand how we are positioned not only as a matter of research practice but also as a matter of knowledge construction. The processes of constructing research problems, research questions, and methodological approaches are central to the ways knowledge is constructed in our discipline. These issues are ones of how knowledge is made in our field and how subjectivity buoys and constrains what researchers see as worth knowing or studying. One research participant, Jeff Rice,[9] wondered in his response, "Why … do we need to know about the early stages of research work? And where would such a project differ from the observations of Janet Emig [or] the complex-

ity of Bruno Latour?" We believe the answer to that question is that understanding the early stages of research work tells a great deal about the values of our discipline—what counts as knowledge and what is seen as researchable. Interestingly, Latour (1998) himself pointed to a parallel concern when he wrote, "There is a philosophy of science, but unfortunately there is no philosophy of research. There are many representations and clichés for grasping science and its myths; yet very little has been done to illuminate research" (p. 208). In effect, Latour calls for a greater understanding of the processes of knowledge making involved in research as opposed to only paying attention to the form of research's final products. Although many in writing studies (Bazerman, 2008; Emig, 1997; MacNealy, 1999; Young et al. 1970) and in feminist research (Fine, 1996; Fonow, & Cook, 2005; Kirsch,   1999; Lather, 1991; Reinharz Davidman, 1992; Richardson, 1997) have theorized research practice while writing reflectively about their own research practices, this body of work has not been so comprehensive as to eliminate all need for further research into how knowledge is made in writing research. In the next section, we focus on our research participants' reflections on how they created research questions and the role their experiences (both professional and personal) played both explicitly and implicitly in the formation of those research problems and questions.

## RESEARCHERS' REFLECTIONS ON PROBLEM SETTING AND THE CREATION OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

When asked to reflect explicitly on the origins of their research questions, participants most prominently emphasized aspects of cognitive dissonance as the impetus for research problem formation: Eight participants (73%) described gaps in knowledge in the field; eight others referred to curiosity or personal desire to figure out how or why something occurs; seven participants (64%) discussed uneasy feelings, arising from a violation of expectation or a clash between beliefs; and creating or recognizing a new connection was cited by six respondents (55%). Although these responses all begin with some type of cognitive dissonance, they really begin with the researcher herself—what she sees as a gap in the field, the kinds of personal curiosity she connects to her professional life, the experiences she has had that left unresolved feelings, and the scholarly areas she believes might be productively (and uniquely) brought into conversation with one another.

In practice, these varying reasons for research come together in a nexus of forces, as Anne Haas Dyson describes:

> First, I start with the curiosities I have, which typically build on the last project I did. … Second, those curiosities meet the particular site I choose; even

> if I start focused on one issue, places have their own story to tell, so original intentions change. Third, all of this happens within the context of what is happening politically in terms of educational policy and ideologically in the field.

In this nexus of factors influencing the research questions she might ask, Dyson describes the relationship of the individual researcher (the curiosities she has) to larger contexts of meaning making (the research site he or she selects and the field in which he or she works and to whom he or she speaks), emphasizing that research questions are a convergence of multiple forces.

But importantly, Dyson suggests, the process begins with the individual, the curiosities he or she has, and his or her larger research history. She elaborates in particular on beginning her article:

> Prior to this project, I had spent years studying the resources of children for entering into school writing, including their relationships with each other, their appropriation of material from human and technological sources of all kinds, including popular media, the diversity of social goals and textual practices they developed in the interplay of official and unofficial child worlds, and, ultimately, the diverse pathways children may negotiate into written language use. The challenges posed by moving among media, the way participation with peers fueled and shaped child writing—these were of great interest to me. But now, the space for children was becoming very tightly structured and there was intense interest in "the basics," particularly in Reading First schools in my new part of the country. I wondered what the consequences were of these structured contexts for how children participated in school writing. Little children, in general, try to be "good," as it were. So what did they assume they were supposed to do? How do they try to stay "within the curricular lines"? What are the consequences of their efforts to do the right thing for how they compose and what their teacher might learn about them as language users? And hence this project.

The years Dyson spent prior to this project poised her to see contemporary literacy challenges faced by children as "of great interest" and led her to "wonder" about a series of big questions. In her response, Dyson has provided us with a rich description of the process leading to research questions. Her professional history, as well as her ideological, epistemological, and scholarly commitments, combined with cultural forces she recognized as gaining momentum. These multiple forces all contributed to her interest and wonder—in both the sense of wonder as a verb (to be curious to know something) but also in the sense of wonder as a noun (a feeling of surprise caused by something beautiful, unfamiliar, inexplicable).[10] Another participant, Lynn Bloom, also notes a sense of wondering that led to her research: "I have been reading food autobiographies and cookbooks and food mags for a long time with great pleasure and wanted to figure

out why this reading is so much fun." Similarly, Richard Raymond begins with his experience as grounds for writing what he describes as an "academic memoir" about "teaching of American literature and Research Strategies at the University of Shkoder in Albania. … This project led to a book, an academic memoir [which] details not only me teaching but also my work with the faculty—exchanging pedagogy and scholarship, collaboratively shaping a writing-centered curriculum in English studies, developing democratic departmental governance." And Barry Kroll describes his nonacademic interests and experiences as influencing the theoretical framework he develops: "I had studied tai chi for a while and was struck by its implications for arguing differently. When I read about aikido I knew I'd found something of great potential. So while the article had several roots and sources, the most important one was aikido."

Peter Smagorinsky recognizes that research ideas are more often grounded in longitudinal research agendas and experiential knowledge rather than existing out there somewhere waiting to be discovered: "The idea didn't quite so much come from somewhere, but rather was part of a long-time interest in what people now call multimodal composing. I published things on incorporating the arts into English instruction as early as 1991, and began publishing empirical studies of artistic composing in 1994." Smagorinsky goes on to explain that "This particular study was not a result of a design, but something that occurred in the classroom of third author Cindy O'Donnell-Allen … I'd gotten a grant from the NCTE [National Council of Teachers of English] Research Foundation and observed her class (often with a research assistant) to study whatever went on, with a special interest in artistic interpretations of literature. The mask-making project was part of Cindy's curriculum, so I recorded kids as they did their masks."  The resulting article focused on mask making as a representational process. As Smagorinsky suggests, research questions don't come from "somewhere"—they arise from a nexus of the researcher's previous experiences, interests, and commitments, and as this example suggests, from the lifeworlds of the people involved—both the research participants and the researchers.

As these researchers explicitly acknowledge, research problems are situated within rich contexts developed over time—sometimes over the career of a researcher. Indeed, eight participants (73%) located their research problems within their own continuing lines of inquiry. Sometimes these continuing lines of inquiry began at the dissertation stage, as Nicole Amare acknowledges: "It came from a graduate student paper I wrote almost 12 years ago about linguistic sexism in print textbooks. I always liked that paper … I decided to modernize the topic and instead look at gender fair language in an online medium." Likewise, Stephen Schneider describes how a chapter from his dissertation became "a response to Susan Kates' article on citizenship schooling and a more general response to the 'civic' claims common in rhetorical education." Sometimes, however, the research question arises from and is grounded in a longer career interest, as Barry Kroll explains: "The germ of the entire sequence was a growing dissatisfaction with classic pro/con argument, as I was teaching it in the late 1980s

early 1990s." In Kroll's recognition of "growing dissatisfaction," we see the manifestation of uneasy feelings arising from a particular social context in which Kroll finds himself uncomfortably positioned. Kroll related an anecdote from observing a teaching assistant:

> She was starting a unit on arguing about gun control. As the students came into the room, she asked each to state their position on gun control, and depending on their answer she had them sit on one side of the room or the other. Neutrality wasn't permitted: each student had to commit and then sit with like-minded peers, across the room from those with the opposing viewpoint. The task was to work to develop arguments that would convince those on the other side—literally. Though this was an extreme situation, it captured concretely many of the things that had been bothering me in my own teaching and in the field of rhetoric generally. With the best of intentions, I'd been promoting polarization and a fundamentally adversarial approach to argument.

Experiencing a violation of expectation through the extremity of the observed situation, Kroll comes to a new recognition of a problem that's been troubling him for some time—a growing dissatisfaction with his own teaching and the field's treatment of teaching argument. From this moment of recognition, Kroll goes on to develop ways of making new connections, through experimenting with his teaching and finally, beginning his article on aikido as a means of arguing differently. Other participants similarly describe their recent publications as situated within larger, longer research projects: Jeff Rice describes his article as part of a larger, book-length project, Barbara Waxman describes her article as arising from her multiple experiences teaching a course on the culinary memoir, and Tiane Donahue responds that her idea "came partly from the call for papers—it was about methodology, and I have been working on clarifying my methodology for other scholars. … I've been trying to bring together linguistics and composition theory for a long time, and this seemed like the right opportunity to clarify this for myself and for others."

Even when researchers enter research sites open to what might develop there, they are the interpretive lens through which those observations filter. Past experiences, background knowledge, and research commitments contribute to our seeing. Good research always begins from a position of possibility with researchers entering research practice open to possibilities that might arise. In recognizing the individual as the interpretive lens through which data is filtered, we suggest the importance of articulating the role our subject positions have on what we notice, what we understand, and what we find interesting in our research practices. Perhaps this is what participants mean to suggest when they identify different forms of cognitive dissonance as their initial beginning—the dissonance between our individual subject positions and the field's understand-

ing—because in these participants contributions, research questions do not begin from simply "noticing a gap" in existing scholarship. It is a complex process of bringing the individual (and all his or her intellectual, epistemological, ideological, political, and nonacademic commitments and experiences) into conversation with the existing body of scholarship.

## RESEARCHERS' REFLECTIONS ON PROBLEM FORMATION AND METHODOLOGICAL CHOICE

When queried about their methodological designs and decision making, 82% of participants identified experiential knowledge as the source of their methodological choices. In the same way that these research participants reveal research problems to be situated within rich contexts developed over time, the methods chosen are situated within rich contexts developed over time. For instance, five participants (45%) had used their chosen method before the current study, and six (55%) explained they used a method employed by other scholars (either research collaborators or others used by published scholars). Thirty-six percent of participants also noted that the methods they chose often were methods they had a good deal of experience using in their continuing line of inquiry. For example, Tiane Donahue has a history with her chosen methods: "This project is a part of my larger research path: looking cross-culturally at student writing, using methods and frames from literary criticism, linguistics, and composition. So, in the publication I was distilling a more broadly-developed methodology. That methodology developed from all of my career." Smagorinsky provides a nice summary of the multiple reasons researchers select methods: "I guess you'd say I selected protocol analysis because it was appropriate for the study and because I was experienced in the method and felt a high comfort level with doing it." To recognize that experienced researchers often employ the same methods repeatedly throughout their careers is not to suggest that the methods are blindly adopted; instead, as these researchers indicate, methodological practices are themselves worked out over time, and repeated use is an important element in a research agenda. We would note that once again the role of subject position and subjectivity significantly shape research in ways which as a field we have barely begun to recognize let alone understand. How does comfort level factor into decision making about research methods, and how does that factor shape the kinds of knowledge that are made and discovered? Lynn Bloom acknowledges that she draws from multiple research methods in her work: "As a rule, there is not one single research method in the work I do; I use combinations of methods in order to get good reliable trustworthy results." But the question remains—how do researchers draw on combinations of methods? How does that process of selection occur, what role does the subjective play in seeing some methods as good or

reliable and others as not? Our research participants are experienced, successfully publishing scholars and researchers—much of their decision making is likely tacit. We believe that it is crucial to understand how those decisions are made and how successful researchers bring subjective experience to bear on the construction of research questions and the construction of research methods as appropriate to those questions. Such an understanding can contribute to nothing less than a more robust understanding of how knowledge is made in our profession.

The steps involved in the messy and subjective parts of knowledge construction remain largely untold in our professional conversations. Written representations of research tend to de-emphasize the researcher's nonacademic frameworks and investments, as writers negotiate what Mortensen and Kirsch (1996) call "the thin line between self-centered display and revealing positionality that researchers must negotiate when they foreground themselves in their texts" (p. xxvii). Barry Kroll's (2008) CCC article on aikido, for example, gives no indication of the visceral connection between research question and one's intellectual life which he described to us:

> I keep coming back to the importance of practical significance and a level of interest and engagement that's deeper than intellectual. For example, while my initial interest in aikido was intellectual, it was also visceral—a connection that deepened when I starting practicing the art. And that experience (I've been doing it for nearly 4 years now) has led to many discoveries and insights. I'm now especially interested in mind-body learning, for example, as well as Asian contemplative practices and their significance for writing. In other words, I've found a trail of projects by following interest and instinct, rather than worrying too much about what's hot in the current discourse in the discipline. (p. XX)

Even further, Richard Raymond, author of the academic memoir we referred to in the preceding section, suggests that a visceral and subjective commitment is crucial to his research process generally: "As corny as it may sound, my decisions about problems and methodology rest on my reflective answers to one question: Why do I care?" Other participants concur that a personal investment in the research question and methodology is crucial:

- "A key factor … is to be 'blown away' by a particular text and to try to figure out why it has such a powerful effect. …. Personal engagement with the topic of the research is critical." (Barbara Waxman).
- "I research what I'm interested in." (Jeff Rice)
- "Well, I suggest knowing what one is passionately interested in, and not just in the abstract. What are the situations, the populations, that grip one's attention. Read the literature as somebody

> who is not just going to summarize it for a qualifying exam but as
> somebody who wants to figure out what engages one's passions
> and interests so that you want to join in." (Anne Haas Dyson)

Nine respondents (82%) suggested the importance of originality and creativity in formation of the research problem and/or in the writing of the results, and several framed research as a rhetorical problem. In his response, Smagorinsky noted, "being an insightful reader of results and then taking your writing seriously [is] a rhetorical problem … as well as an intellectual one." Additionally, four responses (36%) mentioned the importance of following one's instincts and noticing felt connections.

Sometimes the construction of one's methods (as well as the research questions) are encouraged as well as constrained by the contexts in which one works. Nicole Amare, for example, is waiting until after the tenure decision to work on an idea she's had for some time "because the piece will take so much time and I have no guarantee that the idea will be publishable" and two participants, Tiane Donahue and Peter Smagorinsky, each point to the shaping effect grant opportunities can have on project formation. In his experience, Smagorinsky has found that being involved in collaborative projects creates a network of influence on his research:

> Actually there have been serendipitous events that have directed my decision-making. I did a study (published in 1995) on what's taught in secondary English teaching methods classes, based on an analysis of syllabi from around the country—I did that study because I wondered what people in my field were reading and assigning to their students, and ended up with a book-length study. Based on that publication, I was asked to be part of the proposal being written for the Center on English Learning and Achievement, doing the strand on teacher education, something I hadn't ever done. I agreed because it … put me within a network of people I respected (not something I could say of the university in which I taught at the time, where I was intellectually very lonely). It ended up being a pretty productive line of inquiry for me, resulting in a dozen or so publications thus far and a couple of national research awards … Similarly, a colleague here at UGA has recently asked me to be part of a grant doing the protocol analysis segment of a study of how students with learning disabilities use computers in writing. Again, money dropped in my lap to work, and in service of someone else's research question, but it sounds interesting and the other serendipitous grant work turned out well, so why not? Plus it gives me the opportunity to work with an esteemed colleague.

In this description of a period in his larger research life, Smagorinsky identifies a number of influences on decision making: serendipitous events and contacts with colleagues, outside invitations to continue lines of inquiry already completed or underway, and entering into a network of colleagues. Indeed, in both the

situations Smagorinsky describes, one of the significant benefits was connecting with esteemed and intellectually stimulating colleagues. We'd argue that most successful researchers work within similar networks of influence—whether those networks are as present as the ones Smagorinsky describes, or whether they are more evanescent, as Huiling Ding suggests in hhis comment that "Discussion with other people, especially those outside my discipline, helps me to identity the research problem. For methodology, I talked a lot with people in the field."

Either way, methods like research questions are not discovered floating out there somewhere. They are constructed. Whereas researchers are often advised to select methods based on their fit with the research question, such advice (perhaps inadvertently) suggests that there is a one to one correspondence between research methods and research questions. But very few studies can actually only be accomplished using one method. There are many ways of knowing and many types of data we can collect to create narratives of understanding. It is more accurate to acknowledge that different methods are grounded in different epistemologies, ideologies, and political commitments and are sometimes determined as much by our research contexts and collaborative relationships as they are by fit with the research question. What researchers do when they make methodological choices is not chose the method which fits the research question; rather, researchers *construct* their methods as appropriate to the research question. We suggest there is a need for a more clear and well-researched understanding of how method is interwoven with invention and how our personal and public positioning influences our methods. Smagorinsky (2008), in a recent article arguing for situating the methods section as the heart of the article, comments on this need as well:

> I'd like to argue for greater attention to accounts of research method, both for the reader's sake and the writer's. As a reader, I simply need to know how data become results in order to trust the author's claims. But for me as a writer, the Method section plays a pivotal role in the production of a research article. It serves as the core from which radiate the content and organization of each of the other sections of an APA-style research report. (p. 394)

We agree with Smagorinsky's call for more attention to accounts of research method, particularly the relationship between the research question and methodological choice. It is in the research methods section, we would add, that we find traces of the knowledge making process. By understanding "how data becomes results" we understand how the researcher constructed her research question, constructed her method as appropriate to that research question, and constructed a narrative from the raw materials of data she collected. In our participants' explicit reflections on their research processes (reflections of the type which do not for the most part make it into published scholarship) we see the impact of personal background on methodological choice.

## SOME TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS AND
## AN OPENING MOVE

As Brewer and Hunter (2005) suggested, researchers will attend to questions that are "compatible with their own particular theoretical orientations and with the methods linked to those orientations, and will ignore problems that are either theoretically or methodologically incompatible" (p. 54). Acknowledging that we need richer understandings of how subjectivity flows through research processes, we believe this chapter is a beginning contribution to unpacking a complex methodological concern. The participants in our survey suggest some of the ways researchers are the interpretive lens through which research is conducted and data is filtered—but their reflections are a beginning move that need to be elaborated. What these scholars reveal about actual research practices provide a needed model for researchers. We believe that reflections of this type on actual experiences forming research problems, constructing research questions, and fitting research methods to the problem and question are important for methodological understanding. Being explicit about the decisions we make as researchers which lead to the final research problem and question (including decisions about our personal commitments to the research problem, questions, and methods) might be understood as a way of adding a layer of accountability and replicability to our research. Such accountability and replicably crucial to the development of knowledge in the field, as Richard Haswell (2005) notes: "RAD [replicable, aggregable, and data-supported] scholarship is 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). He asserts, "the value of RAD scholarship is its capacity for growth—its comparability, replicability, and accruability" (p. 202). Being explicit about the decisions we make as researchers contributes to this capacity for growth as comparability, replicability, and accruability can be accounted for in our final representations. Ignoring how subjectivity shapes our research keeps us from being able to account for it as an influence.

The scholars and colleagues whose reflections we shared in this chapter help demystify the research process and contribute to understanding research as a process of human knowledge making. They provide an important model for practices which researchers need to engage as part of the knowledge-making process even when those reflections do not become a part of the final representation of research. At the least, our research participants suggest that these processes of research practice are much more complex than our existing understandings of the beginning stages of research and particularly the advice we give beginning researchers. At its core, research is really a way of satisfying a curious mind. Yet, part of the social discourse of research has been to erase the individual—to strive

for an objective stance in which the researcher's subjectivity does not play a role in the final representation. Counter to this striving for objectivity is a feminist research practice and methodology that insists on the recognition of the researcher as a participant in the construction of what questions get asked (and which do not), in the collection of data and work in the research sites, in the relationships enacted with participants. What we are calling for is what feminist researchers have prepared us to see and want—a more explicit understanding and acknowledgment of how subjectivity, subject position, and sociocultural position shape our research processes and the knowledge that results from those practices.[11]Kirsch (1999) writes of these researchers that they "urge researchers to take responsibility for … recognizing that … data are always shaped, to a large extent, by researchers' values, theoretical perspectives, and personal histories" (p. 195). As so many feminist theorists point out, decisions about the conduct of research should be deliberate and thoughtful. Without such deliberation and examination, these very powerful forces can invisibly shape our knowledge production.

Writing can play a significant role in these deliberations. Recognizing that "The original research question and the manner in which it is phrased lead the researcher to examine data from a specific perspective and to utilize certain data collection techniques and modes of data analysis," (p. 41) Corbin and Strauss (2007) suggest the importance of writing in unpacking the researcher's perspectives, thinking, and developing analysis: "What our researcher requires are recording tactics that will provide him with an ongoing, developmental dialogue between his roles as discoverer and as social analyst" (p. 118). Significantly for Corbin and Strauss, reflective writing is more than a written record or representation of thought. Instead, they describe memos as "working and living documents. … Even when a researcher is working alone on a project, he or she is engaged in continued internal dialogue—for that is, after all, what thinking is" (p. 118). The ongoing, developmental dialogue Corbin and Strauss describe can and should begin even prior to the creation of the research problem and the formation of the research question. Especially in the beginning of a research project, using writing as a means of engaging in an internal dialogue with ourselves can help us identify and work through our motivations and purposes for researching and the ways our previous experiences, epistemological, ideological, and cultural assumptions influence what we see as researchable problems and appropriate methods. We agree with Young (1981) that "Control over a felt difficulty begins with its analysis and articulation (which seem to be mutually dependent processes)" (p. 62). Too often, we feel, the analysis of a felt difficulty remains almost tacit—not articulated explicitly, not revealed to audiences—but like Young, we believe that being aware of the complexities involved in the identification of one's research interests and ideological commitments is crucial to creating successful research questions. Grounded in this theoretical understanding as well as in our research participants' reflections, we offer a heuristic (see Table 5.1) for what researchers might do to acknowledge and complicate the invisibility of their own subjectivity.

*Table 5.1. A Heuristic for Problem Setting and Research Question Creation*

This heuristic provides researchers with prompts for thinking about their construction of research problems, research questions, and methods. Being explicit and detailed about their decision making and the intersection of their personal as well as professional commitments can make researchers consciously aware of important shaping influences on the research they conduct. Researchers might use the heuristic in several ways:

- Write in response to these questions at the beginning of researching to articulate the (often implicit) influences that they can then account for in their design and analysis.
- Return to the initial heuristic writing as a record of their initial thinking about the problem, question, and methods.
- Write again in-process, after the research problem, questions, and methods have been determined, as a way of prompting their thinking about the intersection of their personal and professional commitments to the ongoing research and analysis.

This heuristic is not meant to be exhaustive of the preparatory thinking researchers need to do prior to forming their research question, nor do we suggest that every question is equally important for every researcher to answer. The questions are meant to suggest types of issues researchers might explicitly recognize. The heuristic is meant to be a prompt for thinking at any stage in the research process. Researchers should write as much as they can in response to each question, write with more concern for content than form, and let their ideas trigger one another in a kind of free-association fashion.

1. **What are your motivations or purposes for researching? What is it you want to know?** Sometimes research begins with a felt difficulty—with inconsistencies in a researcher's values, beliefs, opinions, knowledge, and reading of existing scholarship. Sometimes something in one's nonprofessional life throws new light on professional concerns. Sometimes research begins with a call within a community (a call for papers, a conference announcement, a research article that ends with ideas for future study). Sometimes research begins in a collaborative relationship—a conversation with a colleague, an invitation to participate in an already formed research project, or work that evolves into scholarship.

2. **What do you already believe about the research problem?** Once you've identified the exigency of your research project, being explicit about your relationship to that exigency and identifying your related experiences and knowledge about the research area an help you elaborate your research question and gain conscious control over the ways the particular subject positions you occupy might shape the research question and study method.

3. **What epistemological and cultural beliefs do you have related to the research problem?** How, in other words, is your research going to be influenced or shaped by your beliefs and assumptions about race/gender/class/sexual orientation/age, knowledge (who can make it, how it is made), and ways of being?

4. **What is your ideological commitment to the subject?** Are you interested in over turning existing understandings? In paying attention to people or practices that have been ignored or overlooked by existing researchers? Ideological commitments can be overtly articulated or not, but research (as any human practice) is always ideological in the sense that it involves the study of ideas.

5. **What professional or intellectual need does this research fill?** Often researchers are encouraged to think about research problems in terms of what hasn't been done in the field (i.e., filling a gap in the existing research). In addition to asking what work hasn't been done, however, is an even more important question, which is "Does this work need to be done?"

6. **What assumptions about academic scholarship shape your work?** What purposes does your academic research serve? What purposes do you want it to serve? Whose voices and perspectives are important to include in the professional conversation? What kinds of evidence are expected or acceptable?

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Even a cursory scan of the six questions in the heuristic presented in Table 5.1 suggests that thinking through the formation of research problems and questions can be a lengthy process. But it should be. As argued here, numerous methodological theorists have asserted that the creation of a good research question can shape the entire project. Time spent up front working out assumptions, beliefs, and commitments to the research question are an investment in successful research. The heuristic presented in Table 5.1 aims at assisting researchers in this initial investment of thinking and planning. As with any heuristic, the goal is not a *product* (some polished, formal piece of prose) but a *process* (of using writing to think through and identify the influences shaping your understanding of your research question as a question, as a researchable problem, and as worthy of your time and attention). These questions prompt researchers to think at the beginning of their planning stages about the relationships between their personal commitments and their professional interests: what they already know before they begin research, what they want to know, why they want to know it, and how their various subject positions intersect with the profession. The goal of the heuristic is to think through the problem, but also to begin an ongoing written dialogue with one's self that can be returned to throughout the research

process and that can develop in complexity and clarity throughout the research process. Corbin and Strauss (2007) argue that reflective writing is as important to the research process as any other part of the process: "One of the complaints we often hear from students is that writing memos … is just too time consuming. … We puzzle over those remarks. Writing memos is part of the analysis, part of doing qualitative work. They move the analysis forward and as such are just as important to the research process as data gathering itself" (p. 118). Likewise, we have found that writing at the initial research stage about what is involved in the shaping of our research questions is an important stage in understanding and planning our research processes (in ways that account for, control, or balance our initial subjective perspectives). Understanding the assumptions informing our research questions can help us be vigilant about how our subject positions shape what we see as researchable questions, appropriate methods, and significant data. In the final writing of our results, articulating these assumptions gives readers a fuller, more complex context for understanding our analysis.

These are questions for beginning researchers or researchers at the beginning of a thorny research problem—but they are also at the same time questions about which we need more explicit understanding. How have experienced scholars embedded these kinds of concerns into successful research practices? How does a researcher negotiate the tension between a personally meaningful research question and one that will be accepted by the field in which the researcher studies? How are research questions (and as a consequence, knowledge in the field) constrained or buoyed by currently dominant cultural forces? What kinds of questions do we not ask? Why do we not ask them (i.e., what forces keep us from recognizing them as relevant or interesting? What forces keep us from seeing them as questions at all?)? What happens when research questions sustain a lengthy part of a researcher's scholarly life (how do those questions evolve, get recharged)? As these questions suggest, a more robust understanding of research questions can help us better understand an important aspect of a disciplinary, knowledge-making process. We are calling for more meta reflection by researchers in their own work as well as for research that helps us understand what actually happens when researchers set problems for themselves and create research questions. Voicing some of the messiness, complexities, and humanness of the questions we ask can help us better understand research as a human endeavor.

## APPENDIX A: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Nicole Amare. "Where Is She? Gender Occurrences in Online Grammar Guides. *Research in the Teaching of English* 42.2 (Nov. 2007): 163-187.

Lynn Z. Bloom. "Consuming Prose: The Delectable Rhetoric of Food Writing." *College English* 70.4 (March 2008): 346-362.

Huiling Ding. "The Use of Cognitive and Social Apprenticeship to Teach a Disciplinary Genre: Initiation of Graduate Students into NIH Grant Writing." *Written Communication* (Jan. 2008): 3-52.

Tiane Donahue. "Cross Cultural Analysis of Student Writing: Beyond Discourses of Difference." *Written Communication* (July 2008): 319-352.

Anne Haas Dyson. "Staying in the Curricular Lines: Practice Constraints and Possibilities in Childhood Writing." *Written Communication* 25.1 (2008): 119-159.

Barry Kroll. "Arguing with Adversaries: Aikido, Rhetoric, and the Art of Peace." *College Composition and Communication* 59.3 (2008): 451-472.

Richard Raymond. "When Writing Professors Teach Literature: Shaping Questions, Finding Answers, Effecting Change." *College Composition and Communication* 59.3 (Feb. 2008): 473-502.

Jeff Rice. "Urban Mappings. A Rhetoric of the Network." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 38.2 (2008): 198-218.

Stephen Schneider. "Good, Clean, Fair: The Rhetoric of the Slow Food Movement." *College English* 70.4 (March 2008): 384-401.

Peter Smagorinsky. "The Method Section as Conceptual Epicenter in Construction Social Science Research Reports." *Written Communication* 25 (July 2008): 389-411.[12]

Barbara Frey Waxman. "Food Memoirs, What Are They, and Why They Belong in the Literature Classroom." *College English* 70.4 (March 2008): 363-382.

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell us about the project you published recently—where did this particular idea come from?
2. How did you determine your methodology for this particular project?
3. Generally, how do you go about locating or identifying research problems?
4. What qualities should a research problem possess?
5. How does the current dialogue in the field influence your formation of research problems?
6. What factors influence the decisions you make about the research problem and your choice of methodology?
7. What advice do you have for students entering the field as to how to discover and then pursue a research problem?

# ENDNOTES

1. As readers will see in the following section, this literature gap is a regularly cited rationale given by the scholars we interviewed and is more prevalent than thinking about what Blakeslee and Fleischer (2007) describe as "personal and professional inventories."

2. Blakeslee and Fleischer are unique in the attention they pay to epistemological processes that must take place prior to the articulation of the research question. Arguing that one's disposition toward research plays a crucial role in the research process, they begin by recognizing that just *seeing* oneself as a researcher is the first step in *being* a researcher. They refer to graduate students they've worked with who were actively involved in the conduct of research but didn't identify themselves as researchers. Of these students, Blakeslee and Fleischer ask, "What did they do to be able to integrate research so seamlessly into their professional lives?" and they offer three factors that contributed to the students' success:
   • the recognition of the important role that research plays in both our personal and professional lives
   • the realization that research is something we all actually know a good deal about already
   • an interest in learning what is involved in doing research and how research is done (pp. 6-7).

3. Interestingly, this chapter, published in 1981, describes a moment in composition history when "Traditional approaches have been criticized for arbitrarily segmenting what is a continuous process at a fairly late stage, usually at the rough draft, and for saying little or nothing about the activities which precede this stage" (Young 1981, p. 59). This critique resonates when we think about discussion of research question formation in theoretical descriptions of the research process. Descriptions of the process can often times implicitly suggest that there is a staged, linear process to "*the* research process" (invention of the research question, methodological consideration, data collection, analysis, and writing up results)—although all researchers know how the research process is a recursive one, as research questions are articulated, complicated through data collection, sometimes thrown aside or revised completely anew, sometimes strengthened through the data. It is interesting to think about the theoretical implications of the implicit linearity and segmenting of research processes.

4. Similarly, epistemological commitments, as well as political and ideological positioning, should lead us to ask why we choose the methods we choose and what is implied in that choice: "The argument put forth in most methods books is that the method one chooses should be the most appropriate for specific research questions you wish to answer. While I agree with this sentiment, I also caution that the methods we choose are not free from epistemological assumptions and taken-for-granted understandings of what counts as data, how the researcher should relate to the subjects of the research, and what are the most appropriate products of a research study" (Naples, 2003, p. 5). Methods are not free from epistemological assumptions; neither are they neutral.

5. All three of us are indebted to Christina Haas for her influence on our thinking about these issues. Beth and Jen had recently read the work of MacNealy and Young,

Becker, and Pike for Chris' class, and Pam was reminded of Richard Young's chapter on problem solving in a conversation with Chris about teaching the research design seminar that Beth and Jen were both taking. Additionally, Chris and Pam have worked together for the several years studying the language of instant messaging (IM). In the course of those 3 years, their research team (at various times including a number of undergraduate and graduate students) has worked as collaborative researchers and has had substantial reflective discussions about not on the IM language but also about the conduct of the research. Research team members have included Diana Awad, Brandon Carr, Emily Dillon, Elizabeth Feltner, Jessica Heffner, Kimberley Hudson, and Ross Pollock. Pam is indebted to the research team members and thankful for the enormous amount she learned in working with them all. Their conversations have certainly contributed to the thinking in this chapter.

6. Editorial letters, interchanges and book reviews were excluded. Additionally, only scholars of single-authored articles were invited in order to limit the variables that might factor into the formation of research questions in collaboratively authored research.

7. Due to an initial lack of response from authors in this journal, we solicited interview participants from a third issue.

8. We collated interview responses into one document, organized by question. We read the interview responses repeatedly, until we had a sense of what was there. We then worked inductively to identify salient analytic categories. Although we began by coding the questions separately, in a subsequent meeting and in phone and email discussions, we continued revising the categories and coded again collaboratively. We coded only one response per category for each respondent, attributing multiple references within a category to rhetorical emphasis. When creating our coding scheme, we noted anomalies, but focused primarily on themes represented across respondents and questions.

    As we have argued above regarding the generation of research questions, we also note here that the categories we generated in response to the data are influenced by our subject position. For Beth and Jen, our position as graduate students certainly impacted the categories we observed. For example, we composed question 7—advice for future scholars, explicitly because of our position at the time as first-year doctoral students. Then, as we read responses to this question, we found ourselves often personalizing the material and thinking about our own experiences being mentored by senior faculty. The categories that emerged for us reflected our ideological commitments and our subject positions. We were also influenced by our reading materials. For instance, Smagorinsky's (2008) insightful explanation of collaborative coding (p. 401) led us to similarly work through our codes together as a process of "collaborative discussion" rather than in search of "independent corroboration" (p. 401).

9. Unless otherwise indicated, quotes from scholars in the following section were collected through our research.

10. The language researchers used to describe their projects' beginnings is suggestive of the personal commitment involved in research practice. Words and phrases such as *wondered*, *wanted to figure out*, *growing dissatisfaction*, *things that had been bothering me*, *clarifying*, *explore*, and *opportunity* are all suggestive of the individual subjectivity involved in the shaping of what becomes the research question, the research site, and research design.

11. This is important in order to understand just how our research is bounded by who we are as a field—if indeed our research problems, questions, and methods are in part grounded in who we are as people, here then is another way it's crucial to encourage and support diversity in our field.

12. Although Smagorinsky's interview was solicited based on his 2008 *Written Communication* article, he noted, "The project that prompted this invitation was not a piece of research, but rather an article about writing research reports in general. So I'll answer these questions in relation to another recently published composition study, Zoss, M., Smagorinsky, P., & O'Donnell-Allen, C. (2007). Mask-making as representational process: The situated composition of an identity project in a senior English class. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, *8*(10). Retrieved from http://www.ijea.org/v8n10/v8n10.pdf.

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