## The Nexus of Local and National Contexts in Writing Program Administration:

UMaine’s Writing Program, 1972-2018

Ryan J. Dippre

Assistant Professor of English

Director of Composition

University of Maine

Department of English

[contact information deleted]

### Problem and Connection to Ongoing Concerns in the Field

Research into the history and development of writing programs has addressed both national trends (Miller; Berlin) and particular universities in various eras (Skinnell; Varnum). More difficult in making sense of writing program histories is highlighting the interactions between national contexts and local contexts. Powerful statements, significant research findings, innovative pedagogical approaches, and impactful workshops and conferences have a long history in the field of writing program administration, but the impact of those texts and events on the day-to-day work of writing program administrators at particular sites of work—the ways in which objects work across local and national boundaries (Star & Griesemer, 1989) remains unclear.

This project aims to explore the connections between national contexts and local contexts at a particular state university in Northern New England. Due to a confluence of historical happenstance—for instance, long-term directors of the writing center and first-year composition, the ongoing efforts by both directors to stay current in their respective fields, effective record-keeping by the Department of English within which both programs are housed, and a sizeable number of witnesses to writing program change available for interviews—the history of this university serves as a *strategic research site* (Merton, 1987) for uncovering the relationships between national and local contexts of writing program administration over time.

This research site will be explored in a two-pronged approach to answer the following question: how do national documents and events in the field of writing program administration / writing research become social facts in the particular, day-to-day work of writing program administration? An archival study of existing records on writing program administration and a series of oral history interviews with current and former writing program instructors from the 1970s to the present day will be used to triangulate historical moments of local response to changes in the field at large. Three early-career researchers (graduate students and/or adjunct instructors interested in learning research methods) will be trained to complete this work.

### Methodology

The driving methodology of this work is grounded theory; particularly, grounded theory in the post-positivist tradition of Charmaz and Saldana. Central to the work of post-positivist grounded theory (GT) are the concepts of theoretical sampling and constant comparison. Researchers will work together to follow the phenomenon of interest (in this case, connections between national and local outcomes) across archival records and interviews. As researchers are tracing their phenomenon of interest, they will be bounding “mentions” of that phenomenon and affixing descriptive labels of the social action present via an *open coding* activity. These open codes will be used to collaboratively (Smagorinsky, 2008) develop a codebook of *focused codes*. From these focused codes, the researchers will develop a grounded theory of the work that this particular state university did to take up, respond to, react to, and transform national discussions in the field of writing program administration.

### Timetable

The study of writing instruction at State University will occur in two stages over the course of nine months. In August 2018, interested participants will complete an intensive grounded theory workshop to learn the basics of qualitative research, collaborative coding (Smagorinsky, 2008), led by the PI. These basics will be used to make sense of and integrate the documentary and oral history methods they will learn in Stage 1, described below.

#### Stage 1: Exploring Archival / Oral History Research Methods (September-November)

After initial training in post-positivist grounded theory, researchers will explore the traditions of oral history research and archival research, including particular examples of each in Writing Studies or adjacent fields. The researchers will meet regularly with the PI throughout these months to discuss both traditions and how they might be integrated through grounded theory approaches. The final product of this stage will be a jointly-authored logic of inquiry for collecting records in ways that are both informed by archival and oral history traditions and oriented toward the grounded theory analysis that the researchers will perform.

#### Stage 2: Record Collection and Recursive Analysis (December-April)

Using the logic of inquiry paper as a starting point, the researchers will begin collecting and analyzing data via open coding in December. In an approach similar to Smagorinsky’s (2008), the researchers will collaboratively develop a set of focused codes in a codebook, from which a grounded theory describing the intersections of national and local contexts can emerge. Regular meetings to discuss data and analysis will occur throughout Stage 2 so that the researchers can frequently check their emerging conclusions.

### PI Expertise

This project lies at the intersection of the PI’s expertise in grounded theory, training novice researchers, tracing the history of writing instruction at this state university, and participating in research teams. The PI has been investigating and working with grounded theory—and, particularly, post-positivist grounded theory—for the past six years, and has completed four separate studies of four different writing populations with it. He has been actively involved in managing existing archives of writing instruction at the state university for the past two years. His training in a school of education provided him with many opportunities to participate in research teams of varying sizes. Furthermore, as a member of several thesis committees in writing studies, he has guided many novice researchers through the process of learning new methods.

### Publication of Results

The results of the study would be published in two waves. First, the graduate students would present their findings at the 2019 CWPA Conference in Baltimore, Maryland. This presentation would serve as a stepping stone to a full manuscript to be submitted to *WPA: Writing Program Administration* in fall semester, 2019.

### Budget

The money received from the CWPA grant would go directly to compensation for graduate student and adjunct research. Three graduate students and adjuncts would be paid $20.00 per hour to conduct at least fifteen hours of archival or oral history research using the tools available in the qualitative research library.

Should this proposal be accepted, the PI would write a grant request from the University’s humanities center to provide copies of Ramsey et al.’s *Working in the Archives: Practical Research Methods for Rhetoric and Composition* to the participants.

**CWPA Grant Budget**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Item** | **Cost** | **Total** |
| Graduate Student Research | $20 / Hour | 45 hours / $900.00 |

**Additional Grant Request – University Humanities Center**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Item** | **Cost** | **Total** |
| Material (*Working in the Archives*) | $34.20 / copy | 3 copies / $102.60 |