

Changing Research Practices and Access: The Research Exchange Index

JENN FISHMAN & JOAN MULLIN

AT THE START OF THE RECENT International Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Research Workshop we conducted with Mike Palmquist, participants brainstormed research ideas. Across small groups of diverse colleagues from two- and four-year institutions, a single, driving question emerged: “What kind of research do I really need?” For some workshop participants, the question arose in relation to the perennial challenges presented by colleagues who want answers to these questions: Why should I, as an expert in my own field, have to teach writing? How can you, as an expert in writing, help my department and me? And, really, why can’t students learn what they need in first-year writing? For others, this question was yoked to pedagogy: What are students really getting out of the writing intensive courses offered at my institution? How can I judge the effectiveness of a new assignment? Should I try portfolio grading? And yet another group, which was perhaps the largest, was motivated by overarching programmatic concerns: What kind of research will convince others that writing is central to learning? What should be the relationship between first-year writing and WAC courses? What can I learn by comparing outcomes with similar schools in my region, across the country, and around the world?

Our workshop group was aware of available resources from WAC Clearinghouse publications to CompPile, as well as recent traditionally published research useful for supporting WAC. In addition to these easily accessible texts, inquiries in genre studies and cultural-historical activity theory, the more recent ethnographic and quantitative studies summarized in *Researching the Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-Based Practice* (Babcock and Thonus), and work on transfer (e.g., Downs and Wardle, Nowacek) speaks to the burgeoning interest in WAC research. This current work answers the call posed by John Ackerman in “The Promise of Writing to Learn,” underscored by Martha Townsend in “WAC Program Vulnerability and

What to Do About It: An Update and Brief Bibliographic Essay,” and issued by Richard Haswell in “NCTE/CCCC’s Recent War on Scholarship” (62-63). However, published, research-based scholarship, bibliographies, and online journal sites require that WAC scholars be current with past research and keep up with all the new materials, that they already know what research questions would best serve a particular program, and that they have access to abstracts or actual journal articles for theories and models of scholarship that best suit their specific context. Perhaps most important, our workshop participants wanted more detailed information about recent and ongoing work that could inform their next steps in conducting relevant, doable, applicable research.

These needs are no less important now than they were in 1988. It was then that Toby Fulwiler outlined what makes WAC programs successful; now, with more than thirty years of WAC history behind us, Townsend recognizes how relevant Fulwiler’s statements remain, not least because the obstacles to program success he enumerates are still largely true across populations. Fulwiler noted problems with ongoing confusion about program nomenclature (62), poorly paced program growth rates (62-63), nonstandard administrative structures (63), and amorphous, open-ended program structures (63-64). Townsend neatly summarizes what remain as three obstacles related to research and program success: “WAC programs are result oriented, not research oriented” (47), “measures [of students’ writing and learning development] that are quick and dirty do not seem to prove much” (47-48), and “evaluating successful WAC programs is as complicated as evaluating good teaching or successful learning” (48).

Given the complicated, interconnected nature of WAC, knowledge about and quick access to research in programmatic, curricular, and pedagogical areas is crucial. The newly developed Research Exchange Index (REx; <http://researchexchange.colostate.edu/>) will provide such knowledge and access in the form of a searchable database that contains short reports detailing the nitty-gritty of what researchers do, with whom, and why they do it: What were researchers’ initial questions? What research did they draw on to plan their studies? What methods did they use on what population(s)? What were their earliest findings? What would they have changed in their study, and what are their questions now? While many of these details are woven into published scholarship, REx contains concise records of research activity, which make it possible to conduct swift and focused searches across each other’s questions, methods, and reflections. Based on search results, REx readers can survey research activity in a particular area, find models for their own projects, or invite a colleague to collaborate on a new project. Equally important, REx includes information about research not readily available: ad hoc, local studies that are not published, that may be, at most, buried in a conference presentation or briefly referenced on a listserv.

Quite often such unavailable resources fall into the RAD and RFM categories. Although RAD (replicable, aggregable, and data-driven research) is the more familiar and at times more controversial term, RFM research is equally as important. Defined by Richard Haswell in “Documenting Improvement,” replicable, feasible, and meaningful research (RFM) is key to contemporary researchers, whether they are teachers trying to design projects that will be “doable” during busy semesters or program administrators hoping to gather more than just numbers to share with colleagues. While the tendency has been to elide RAD and RFM research with published research, REx brings these different types of research together, setting records of published work alongside records of rigorously planned and carried out, *unpublished* RAD and RFM projects. Believing that published and unpublished academic work, qualitative and quantitative, RAD and RFM, all go hand in hand, REx emphasizes the relational aspects of the variety of our research by making visible information about how researchers construct knowledge through their work with each other, their subjects, and their audiences.

Inverse Proportions: More Research, Less Access

Multiple factors have led to a resurgence of research in WAC over the last twenty years. Across campuses, the growth of writing curricula has been matched by the growth of degree-granting programs and tracks at all levels, BA to PhD. Old and new programs alike have been subject to both internal and external pressure to meet and exceed benchmarks designed to measure efficacy and success, while tenure-line faculty (in particular) have faced increased pressure to publish, whether in traditional formats (i.e., articles, scholarly monographs) or in emerging forms of publication. These contradictory forces of expansion and narrowing support traditional humanities scholarship at the same time they create the need for new forums of scholarly exchange. Such demands have expanded listservs, conferences, and publications in all areas of writing studies (e.g., *Administrative Theory and Practice*, *Argumentation and Advocacy*, *Bulletin for the Association of Business Communication*, *Cross-Cultural Communication*, *Diálogos Latinoamericanos*, *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*). While these platforms enhance our access to new work and ideas, they also make it impossible to keep up—to chart the development of a methodology, map the trajectory of a specific subfield, or review available research to situate a new study.

Theresa Lillis and Mary Jane Curry’s multiyear study of academic writing and publishing by multilingual scholars seeking publication in English medium journals raises additional concerns for all writing researchers: gatekeeping. As Lillis and Curry demonstrate, “The politics of text production and evaluation and specific ideologies—including those about language, location and reviewing practices—are often rendered invisible” (161). For the most part, both old and new scholarly

forms are produced by researchers in specific, often privileged professional situations where they are obligated to but also rewarded for producing certain kinds of scholarly texts. Also invisible much of the time are the ways in which these researchers rely on each other to build journals and participate in publications. This professional collaboration results in excellent scholarship, but as Lillis and Curry found, that work can exclude a broad sweep of research and researchers. For multilingual scholars, “[T]he centripetal pull towards the dominant practices and ideologies in the Anglophone centre ensures that fundamental issues of what counts as relevant knowledge and who has the right to determine what counts as relevant knowledge remain in the centre” (161). The results are significant: a body of research informed by other traditions as well as new ways of researching remains unavailable.

If the way we sponsor research is steeped in potentially exclusionary practices then so are the kinds of academic work valued and made available to scholars. This is not to criticize the necessity for evaluation or standards for different forms of promotion and professional reward. It is to recognize that publishing practices were created at a time when print, mail, and travel circumscribed the production and dissemination of work now done by many more people using a greater variety of theoretical bases, methods, and tools in a wider variety of contexts. Certainly today neither peer-reviewed journals nor scholarly monographs comprise the only—or even the primary—ways in which field-shaping data circulates. Instead, data that has defining influence on praxis, particularly in writing programs, is regularly found in programmatic or institutional materials comprised of planning documents, meeting minutes, handbooks and websites, teaching handouts, course projects, and unpublished findings. The research reported in these materials is often RAD or RFM work that provides a wealth of information to their initial audiences, even while the studies themselves remain inaccessible and therefore unknown to and uncitable by others. Unpublished research and the work it represents is often segregated from scholarship and scholarly conversations and, therefore, missing from most databases and bibliographies (which concentrate on published works). As a result, valuable and informative work is not counted or accounted for.

REx Responds

In 2006, as we began to imagine REx, Peter Smagorinsky’s anthology, *Research on Composition: Multiple Perspectives on Two Decades of Change*, was published along with *The Handbook of Writing Research* by Charles A. MacArthur, Steve Graham, and Jill Fitzgerald. These have been joined on our bookshelves by a host of companion volumes, from the *Handbook of Research on Writing* (2009), edited by Charles Bazerman, to *Writing Studies Research in Practice* (2012), edited by Lee Nickoson and Mary P. Sheridan. This same period witnessed the inauguration of several new

journals, including *The Journal of Writing Research*, and it saw the transformation of Santa Barbara's triennial international writing conferences into the International Society for the Advancement of Writing Research. During this same period, *CompPile* grew as a bibliographic resource, and the WAC Clearinghouse along with Parlor Press began publishing books and posting links to resources and program websites. Informed by these works and a combination of direct and indirect feedback from colleagues across the writing studies community, REx (as the Research Exchange) went through at least five major reinventions before emerging in 2011 as the Research Exchange Index. Throughout, the root goal of REx has remained the same: to improve our collective ability to conduct writing research by establishing a resource that promotes ongoing, accessible information exchange among writing researchers.

REx differs from existing resources in several important ways. A peer-built, peer-edited, and peer-reviewed resource, REx

- focuses on research processes along with research findings or products;
- provides summaries of research (as opposed to full-length articles);
- sorts information into searchable fields and categories;
- brings together information about completed, ongoing, and stalled studies.

Whereas scholarship tends to highlight research findings, REx collects information about the *activity* of research, starting with researchers' questions and the contexts for their work. REx also collects information about researchers' methods and methodologies, the logistics of individual projects, and both summaries of and reflections on completed as well as ongoing inquiries. REx also respects the fact that many researchers' regular professional interactions leave them little time or mental energy to spare; it asks only for summative descriptions of projects completed or in process. This information comes directly from researchers (see Figure 1). The contents of each report form the REx database and will be searchable by individual field and users' own key terms. This information will be available after a multistage process of collection, editing, and peer-review is complete and the database is formally published by a digital scholarly press.

On this calendar, the REx production process will take five to seven years, and once it is complete, production will begin again. That is to say, after the first edition of REx is published, information collection for REx, 2e will begin. At that time, researchers who reported projects in process will have an opportunity to update information about their work, while researchers with new projects will be able to register them. The second and all subsequent editions of REx will be cumulative, meaning REx users will be able to search all available editions both individually and together. In addition, we anticipate hosting a variety of related activities and

publications, including workshops in REx best practices and publications that reflect what teachers and researchers learn when they put REx to use. Looking even further ahead and thinking about the ways in which available technologies may change and grow, we imagine the evolution of REx will only be limited by our collective imaginations—and our ability, as a community of practice, to match shared needs with sharable tools.



Figure 1. REx research report, accessible via the REx website, <http://researchexchange.colostate.edu/>.

Returning to the present, this essay marks the midway point in the REx production process. The first stage is taking place right now, and anyone who has conducted RAD or RFM research between 2000 and now should visit the REx website, establish an account, and file one report per individual project. Collection began at the National Council of Teachers of English Centennial Convention in November of 2011 and ends May 31, 2013. This phase of REx production is led by a group of more than thirty volunteers who serve as REx Acquisitions Editors (AEs). Located in and outside the U.S., AEs lead targeted collection efforts across writing studies' subfields, including assessment, basic writing, writing centers, digital composing, disability studies, discourse analysis, first-year composition, high school-to-college transition, K-12 writing, knowledge transfer, linguistics, second-language writing, teacher-research, technical and professional writing, two-year college writing research, WAC, and writing about writing. To cover these areas and others, AEs do their greatest

work at conferences, talking face-to-face with current researchers. Through their efforts REx has been present at numerous 2011 and 2012 meetings, including the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Computers and Writing, the European Writing Center Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the Council of Writing Program Administrators, as well as the Research Network Forum, the International Writing Center Association Collaborative, and the Dartmouth Summer Seminar for Composition Research. In addition, AEs have directed their attention to regional conferences, informal meetings of local researchers, and individual departmental and program-based groups, and they have made good use of available digital resources.

As counterparts to AEs, Editorial Reviewers (ERs) will take over editorial responsibilities during the second phase of REx production, once acquisitions have ended, and they will focus on reviewing, fact checking, and copyediting reports to ensure their maximum usability. As editors, ERs will not serve as gatekeeper-critics, evaluating the design or execution of projects indexed in REx. Instead, ERs' responsibility will be to ensure the clarity and accuracy of the information contributors share about their research. To this end, as ERs work closely with subsets of REx contents, their goal will be to recommend individual reports for inclusion with or without revision. In some cases, reports may need only minor changes; in other cases reports may need greater corrections or clarifications. For example, ERs might ask contributors to define a specialized term, resolve conflicting chronological information, add further explanation to a project abstract or summary, or replace a dead link to online project findings. In addition, ERs will confirm that contributors have completed their reports, taking into account that each researcher may not have information for every item on the REx form. These activities will give ERs a unique perspective on database contents, and their final responsibility will be to file a short reflection on the materials they edited.

During stage two, we as managing editors will also read through the collected materials to complete work on framing the database with an introductory essay and glossary of research terms. Then, during stage three, we will submit the database and supporting materials to a digital scholarly press for peer review and publication. This somewhat attenuated process may seem unnecessary or extreme in an era of evolving scholarly communication, which includes proliferating wikis and increasingly sophisticated crowd-sourced scholarly publication. However, reception of earlier iterations of REx taught us the persistent importance and value of certain aspects of traditional publication, even as they confirmed the need for new kinds of resources. Thus, REx trades the gratification of instant access for a deliberately layered editorial process that will result in a resource that offers standardized content and a

recognizably legitimate imprimatur (read: formally peer-reviewed, professionally published, and citable work).

Using REx to Change Research Practices and Access

Designed to be a comprehensive resource, REx makes easily visible our field's

- methodological diversity, embracing the many ways it is possible to design and carry out RAD and RFM research;
- geographic diversity, with participation from various collection sites and locations;
- theoretical diversity from multiple writing studies' subfields and writing researchers across disciplines.

Once REx is published it will promote multiple programmatic uses. For example, it will be possible to search REx reports for studies involving a particular methodology in order to explore its use over time. REx users might search the database to map features of hybrid research or track the influence of a particular theorist on inquiries conducted within a specific subfield during a set time. Likewise, researchers who come to REx hungry for practical information about program assessment will be able to quickly and easily identify relevant work, using either narrow searches through specific fields or keyword searches. Thus, researchers will be able to find examples conducted in similar institutions or on similar occasions (i.e., curriculum review, Quality Enhancement Program assessment, thesis project), and they will be able to narrow searches according to the location of data collection sites, institution types, and other shaping factors. Thanks in large part to the work of international AEs, REx may also make it possible to compare research practices and findings across international boundaries.

The REx database will also function as a rich teaching and mentoring tool for anyone offering courses in undergraduate or graduate research methods, leading professional development workshops for peers, or starting their own research career. For example:

- A new WAC director tasked with evaluating WAC courses in STEM departments uses REx to look up similar studies, something she can determine from a quick database search.
- A graduate researcher who has collected a large corpus of writing as part of his dissertation project is dissatisfied with the text analysis software he is using. He searches REx and finds reports that enable him to identify either better available analysis tools or better strategies for his particular study.

- After completing a site-based study that yields unexpected results, an experienced researcher goes to REx looking for others who reported similar findings. Although she does not find any, she does discover several studies that are similar to her own. She contacts the PIs and proposes pooling data in order to look for broader evidence of the phenomenon that so intrigued her.
- A new professor of writing studies is preparing a graduate seminar on WAC research. Teaching on the quarter system, she doesn't have time to assign full-fledged research projects. Instead she has her students mine REx for examples of research in different phases of completion. She also contacts individual researchers to find people willing to share process documents (IRB drafts and feedback, revised survey and interview protocols, etc.) and/or Skype into her class.
- A not-so-new professor of WAC is teaching a pre-dissertation seminar for doctoral students planning to conduct case study research for their dissertations. Using REx he finds strong examples of small studies similar to the work his students will be doing. In one or two cases, he even finds entries in which researchers have included descriptions of their projects from their original dissertation proposals.

As a teaching and mentoring resource, REx is thus not only a reservoir of static information but also a tool that promotes active communication among researchers, recognizing that everyone benefits from advice and guidance regardless of their level of experience or degree of training. At the same time, REx involves colleagues whose institutional affiliations (or non-affiliations) and rank, professional resources (or lack of resources), and/or research focus may isolate them from other researchers and relegate their contributions to the margins of formal scholarly conversations.

By creating a resource that is widely representative of contemporary writing research activity and application, REx is more than a practical tool that can make research easier and more efficient. REx also aims to change the culture of research in writing studies, especially for those who have “differential access to the global academic marketplace and the resources for full participation in it.” REx ultimately asks all of us to “reimagine the kind of knowledge production, evaluation and distribution practices currently governing scholars’ practices and experiences” (Lillis and Curry 155). Part of this reimagining, as Deborah Brandt observes, is responding as researchers to the way mass writing is replacing mass reading as the root of mass literacy (174). Scholarship on digital and multimodal composing is especially rich with observations about how writing now includes movie making, website building, and the self-designing and publishing of books. In this context, production and practice become more prominent and more closely associated with invention as well

as agency. The time could not be more right for building REx, a resource that indexes information about the activity of research and promotes its exchange.

Joining other highly collaborative, digital native disciplinary resources such as Writing Spaces (<http://writingspaces.org/>), CompPile (<http://www.comppile.org/>) and The WAC Clearinghouse (<http://http://wac.colostate.edu/>), REx reflects the strength of our community's commitment to combined knowledge production and use. Similar to these resources, REx also lives and dies according to the quality of the writing studies community's participation. Most simply put, if researchers want what they say they want, those active between 2000 and the present must file reports about their work; if records of award-winning and often-cited studies are not indexed alongside records of unpublished and completed or ongoing research, then REx will be too limited in scope to be useful to anybody. REx may not be the most radical example of marshaling what Clay Shirky calls "cognitive surplus" (e.g., Wikipedia), yet it does demand widespread participation in resource creation. Perhaps it goes without saying that REx is an ambitious project, but it challenges our field to move beyond mere talk of inclusion and praxis by actively participating in new modes of scholarship and exchange: <http://researchexchange.colostate.edu>.

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