

# The Ultimate Guide to Poorly Designed Research Projects

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In 2020, for the first time since I became writing centre director, I challenged myself to do something that I hoped would have a significant impact on the field of writing centres; at first, I was very excited, and then I hit a wall, well, many walls really, at considerable speed, and each one hurt a lot. Fortunately, reflections, feedback, discussions, and creative thinking can give data new life—an important lesson young or unconfident researchers should remember. I want to share how much I learned through the mental, financial, and technical ups and downs of this project to

demonstrate that a messy research process is normal and not the end of the world. The purpose of this article is therefore not to fill a gap in the scholarship but to illustrate the importance of providing support to inexperienced or struggling writing centre scholars, and to demonstrate that with a bit of perseverance, failed research projects can take on new (and exciting) life.

## **AMBITIOUS GOALS OF THE PROJECT**

Truth be told, I am an unconfident researcher—I prefer to teach, and after having conducted some quantitative research in the field of TESOL for my PhD, I never believed I had the authority to say anything significant to the writing centre community. So, when I was inspired by an IWCA conference presentation to undertake a research project, I unexpectedly found myself believing that maybe I could have a significant impact on the field after all. The presentation I attended was on how to support students with mental and physical disabilities. As I was listening to the speaker, I remembered some of the unusual events that have taken place in the writing centres I have directed. I decided I wanted to go beyond rigid categorizations of “disability” and “mental illness” to look at everything difficult or even traumatic that student writers bring to the writing centre: depression, racism, homophobia, failing grades, break-ups, homesickness, sexism, stories of abuse, social anxiety, and more. Writing does not happen in a vacuum and all these non-writing-re-

lated “life events,” as I call them, impact not only the students who experience them, but also the tutors.

Although tutors are trained to respond to most common issues that may come up during their tutorials (e.g., stressed students), they may not know how to respond to more complex situations addressed in student papers or mentioned by the writers themselves (e.g., mental illness or abuse). Also, tutors might not know how to handle the potential impact these difficult student stories might have on their own mental states. A few studies have been conducted on student writers with special needs (e.g., Babcock and Daniels; Pemberton), and some scholars have made concrete suggestions on how to support students with learning and physical disabilities (e.g., Murray; Stark and Wilson). But very few studies have investigated the impact non-writing-related life events have on writing centre tutorials, and I could not find any studies investigating the impact of students’ recounted life events on the tutors themselves. I thus decided to investigate 1) *what kinds* of non-writing-related issues come up during tutorials; 2) how tutors respond to these issues *during* the tutorials; and 3) how tutors deal with difficult information and emotions *after* the tutorials. I also wanted to analyze if students’ first language influenced their discussions of different issues. Ultimately, I wanted to 1) make our writing centre more inclusive and useful to as many students as possible; 2) prepare tutors to deal with difficult tutorials while still providing outstanding writing support; and 3) build on support systems that already existed within the university to provide resources to tutors who experienced disquieting or traumatic tutorials. Of course, more experienced researchers will already at this point have identified one of my major problems, which was trying to do too much. But I had to crash into a few walls before reaching that conclusion.

## **THE FIRST WALLS I HIT**

To understand my research topic well, I started reading in Disability Studies. Because I walk with crutches, you could logically assume that I sometimes think about that particular aspect of my life. But when I started reading Rebecca Babcock and Sharifa Daniels’ *Writing Centers and Disability*, I fell into an abyss of emotions and questions I had unknowingly ignored until that moment. In fact, I felt so deeply hurt by the discrimination experienced by some writing centre directors with disabilities that I had to stop reading the book for a few months to examine every aspect of my professional life from the perspective of my own disability—something I had never done before. I almost stopped the study because of this strong emotional reaction.

Thinking about my distress, months later, I realized that this book forced me to face years of discrimination I had unconsciously chosen to ignore. Also, my work with students and tutors in the writing centre had always brought me incredible joy, and early literature always talked about “writing centre space” as a “safe place” (Harris), so it seemed unimaginable that such pain, struggle, and discrimination could in fact be happening in writing centres. To clear my head, I started looking for literature on student life, a topic I had never researched before. Thanks to the help of our Associate Dean of Student Life and the resources he suggested, I learned that a significant number of post-secondary students experience one or more difficulties personally, physically, and/or mentally (e.g., Baker et al.). As noted above, these “life events” can have an impact not only on the students’ ability to write, but also on their behaviour during writing centre tutorials and on the emotions their tutors may experience during and after these tutorials.

However, I quickly realized that two or three articles were not enough to understand the complexity of university students’ lives and challenges. My lack of knowledge of relevant keywords and resources, as well as the patchy information I found on the Canadian post-secondary context, resulted in a complete investigative fiasco. Like a novice researcher, I had underestimated the expertise of Student Life professionals. Ironically, I am often angered by people who think tutoring in writing centres requires expertise only in grammar and punctuation; yet I was doing the exact same thing with a complex and multifaceted discipline that requires years of study and research before it can be fully understood.

### **A FEW MORE BUMPS IN THE ROAD**

I received Research Ethics Board approval on January 8, 2019. Then, from January 14 to April 5, 2019, I audio-recorded 251 writing centre tutorials. The plan was to have these recordings transcribed professionally, following the transcription suggestions of Magdalena Gilewicz and Terese Thonus. While tutorials were recorded, I started reading about discourse analysis (e.g., Mackiewicz). I wanted to find recurring mentions of different life events (e.g., mental illness, culture shock, discrimination) in the transcripts and study their impact on tutorials. Then, with the help of a psychologist, I wanted to evaluate the results of my discourse analysis to propose improved tutor education strategies, best practices to support students, and strategies to respond to the impact of traumatic tutorials on tutors.

Unfortunately, when I listened to some of the recordings, I realized that they had not captured what I was hoping to capture. I was ex-

pecting students to openly discuss personal issues with their tutors, the way they often do. However, because the tutorials were being recorded, both tutors and students seemed to make every effort possible to stay focused on writing issues. A few times in the recordings, I even heard students say, for example, “could we please pause the recording? I’d like to talk to you about my problems with this prof.” The tutor then paused the recording and restarted it a few minutes later. In addition, despite the good-quality audio recording device I had bought, the soft voices or strong accents of certain participants prevented some recordings from being fully transcribed.

The next serious issue I encountered was the cost of transcriptions. While friends and Google searches suggested plenty of transcription tools, I knew that if I wanted reliable transcriptions, I had to hire a professional transcriber who was familiar with the field of Writing Studies and comfortable with accents. Unfortunately, I had not realized that professional transcribers are very costly and can take hours to transcribe just a few minutes of conversation. I was thus able to pay for only 38 transcriptions out of the (randomly-selected) 251 recordings I had collected before my research money ran out.

I read several articles about different types of transcriptions and choices that can be made when transcribing writing centre tutorials (e.g., Gilewicz and Thonus). Still, after learning about the different uses for and ethics of transcription work (e.g., Bucholtz; Oliver et al.; Henderson), I realized my discourse analysis was also going to fail; indeed, the more detailed transcriptions are, the more difficult they are to read and analyze. Also, detailed transcriptions take more time and are therefore more expensive. So, because my transcriptions needed to be done relatively quickly and be easily readable, they could not indicate details such as tonal changes, hesitations, repairs, fillers, emphases, speed of speech, accents, or tone of voice. An example of why this lack of information was problematic is that the rudimentary indication of “hesitation” on a transcript could be interpreted variously as uncertainty, fear, shyness, unwillingness to speak, or lack of knowledge. Similarly, when a student was “laughing,” the transcription could not indicate what kind of laugh that was—a nervous laugh? A sad laugh? A happy laugh?

I realized—too late—that every choice the transcriber made, every word they wrote (or didn’t write) in their transcripts, would affect the data I was going to analyze and therefore the results. I did not want the transcriber to become an “interpreter” of students’ and tutors’ voices (even though I now realize that this is precisely and

inevitably what all transcribers do), and I refused to allow myself to assign potentially incorrect meaning to what I was reading in the transcripts. Looking back, I am not sure why I felt so strongly against this interpretation and “appropriation” process of the speakers’ voices and meaning—maybe it stemmed from the fact that as a non-native speaker of English and disabled person, I am constantly afraid for my words to be misinterpreted or for my voice not to be heard. Whatever the case, I was unable to adequately understand and analyze the states of mind of the recorded students and tutors, even when personal stories were shared. These transcriptions and discourse analysis methods proved ill-advised, and I felt at a loss.

### THE RECONSTRUCTION PROCESS

This messy and painful research debacle took eight months. After everything had fallen apart, I was left with one question: What should I do now? I had 251 tutorial recordings, 38 semi-decent transcripts, a discouraged mind, and a broken heart. I told myself that I was lucky to have so many recordings, and that there had to be something I could do with them. It seemed like a big waste of time, energy, and resources, not to mention a waste of the participants’ willingness to contribute to writing centre scholarship, to not use these recordings.

When I was facing challenges or discouragement writing my PhD dissertation, my father always told me, “Imagine that you are doing a conference presentation about your current problem: How would you present the problem and what questions would you ask?” Fifteen years later, I remembered my father’s advice, and I presented my “problem” at two conferences. Instead of sharing the exciting research findings I was hoping to present, I talked about my struggles and failures and my utter loss of faith in my research capabilities. At the end, I asked the audience for suggestions and feedback. While I did receive several interesting suggestions, what struck me the most were the stories of research failures and challenges that audience members—even experienced writing centre scholars—shared with me. I was also surprised to learn that many writing centre administrators and tutors were hoping I would eventually find ways to answer my initial research questions.

My father was right: talking about my struggles at these conferences made me realize that 1) even if my research project had failed, I *did* have a voice and a place in our field; 2) research can be challenging for everyone, at any stage of the research process and at any stage in one’s professional career; and 3) thinking creatively could allow me to use my data for other research purposes. For ex-

ample, while reading some tutorial transcripts, I remembered Dianna Bell and Sara Elledge's study, which investigated, by analyzing turn-taking and time-at-talk, whether tutors or students dominated writing centre tutorials. Indeed, I noticed that my tutors often talked more than non-native writers of English. That might be an interesting topic to start investigating with my existing data.

I also realized that I could look at my data from a different angle and still try to answer my initial research questions. For example, I could select moments in the transcripts when students *almost* started talking about personal topics and organize focus group discussions with tutors and writers to talk about what *might have been discussed* in these typical non-writing-related interactions. In addition, I had discovered new areas of interest—transcription studies and disability studies—and my curiosity was piqued. This is why I started, with a friend (as collaboration is a safer avenue for inexperienced or wary researchers), a small research project called *Accessibility and Inclusivity Barriers in Writing Center Conferences*.

I know, now, that I must read a lot more about many subjects and talk with experts in these areas before blindly embarking on research projects. I could also learn more about the affective nature of research and topics that are “too close to home” by reading *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles*, by Harry Denny and Robert Mundy, for example. And finally, in mulling over my research difficulties, I found myself drafting this piece in order to think them through, more fully understand them, and possibly help others avoid them in future.

### **GRIT IS STICKING WITH YOUR FUTURE, DAY-IN, DAY-OUT<sup>1</sup>**

So, why did this research project crash and burn so spectacularly, even though this was not my first research project? Maybe because this was my first qualitative research endeavor. But most importantly, my lack of faith in my research abilities, coupled with beliefs that “everyone else” does research easily and publishes perfect academic articles effortlessly, put too much pressure on me. My expectations were so high that I tried to answer too many questions, started collecting data without planning my project carefully, and did not take the time to learn the many skills I needed to be successful. Yes, exploring new areas of research and being enthusiastic is important, but with a more reasonable plan of action, I could have avoided some complexity-related failures while still making room for discovery and growth.

At the same time, although my research failures seemed like a waste of time and money and the cause of a lot of heartache, they

provided me with valuable learning experiences (Rickly and Cargile Cook)—and that is *really* important for junior and struggling researchers to remember. These failures allowed me to learn about new tools, to meet great people, to discover that research is often complex and messy, to become aware of my unreasonable expectations, and to find inspiration for future projects. I am now aware that my own “life events” can both positively and negatively impact my assumptions and research inclinations. And I also know that as long as I am still asking important questions, speaking with interested and interesting people in the field, spending the necessary time to learn new skills, and thinking creatively, my project won’t die.

In the end, I want to be a better writing centre director and an impactful contributor to our scholarship (at least in a small way), so I should never let a few crashes into walls and bumps in the road stop me. Indeed, failure will always be emotionally charged but should not be seen as fatal, as it will often afford new knowledge, open new paths, and provide new opportunities—even if not the expected ones.

## NOTES

1. From Angela Duckworth’s *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. Scribner, 2016.

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